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BY
LEONARD MERRICK

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London: Chatto & Windus, Piccadilly.

This Stage of Fools

This Stage of Fools

By

Leonard Merrick

Author of "Violet Moses," "The Man who was Good,"
"Mr. Bazalgette's Agent," etc.

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To my Wife.

Stonehill 6 Dec. 1913

"THE Laurels and the Lady" is now published for the first time. Two of the following tales and the sketch called "A Romance of a Coffee-Stall" are reprinted from *Wit and Wisdom*, a journal no longer existent, but which many will recollect. "A Mere Incident" appeared in *Belgravia*, and the other stories were written respectively for *The English Illustrated Magazine*, *The Sketch*, *The Album*, and *The World*. To all the Editors for their permission to reproduce my contributions, my sincere thanks are due.

L. M.

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Stories.

The Laurels and the Lady.

I.

When Willy Childers was sent to the Cape, he went to the last country on the face of the habitable globe to which he was suited. Certainly it is a question whether he would have made a success of life anywhere, but in the Cape he was so glaringly out of place that he became conspicuous. In Paris—when he had learnt the language—he would at least have felt at home; he would have drifted by degrees into a congenial set in London; even in New York, enthusiasm and diligence may discover an artist on his way to or from one of the European steamers; but on the Diamond Fields, a young man who hoped to be a poet, and who did write verse, was an incongruity that defies comparison.

To give him his due, he was conscious that his existence was absurd there, and justified the chaff it received, and he loathed the "Fields" with a deeper loathing than any other member of its perspiring population; but he could not go to

the length of altering his nature, and becoming brisk and enterprising, nor did he want to do that. It was not with his nature, but with his environment he found fault. "Lucky rhymes to him were scrip and share," and he was full of confidence that his "mellow metres" were going to make him celebrated one day. He would rather have been left in peace with plenty of stationery than have had the best business of any broker in the market.

It had been as a broker that he commenced. His uncle, Blake Somerset, was the manager of the Fortunatus Mining Company in Bultfontein, and when Willy had come down from Oxford, Somerset had written to the Dulwich villa, saying that the university career for which the boy had begged had been "damned folly," and proposing that now it was over, his nephew should come out to South Africa and try to make a living.

It must be conceded that Willy had not distinguished himself at Oxford, and displayed no ability for any of the recognized professions.

None the less he was inclined to regard the advice as preposterous. Dimly he had had visions of being called to the Bar, and obtaining pleasant chambers where he could write poetry all day without being disturbed; but he had reckoned without his mother, without her faith in her brother's judgment. The letter had

made a strong impression on her mind, and at the idea of its being scouted she both showed temper and shed tears. The good lady's antecedents and sympathies were commercial. She, too, had felt Brasenose to be a "folly"—indeed, she felt the adjective which as a lady she might not use; and the possession of a son who seemed contented to roam about the garden with a book of Rossetti's, or Walter Pater's, and who confessed that he did not know the multiplication-table, was causing her considerable disquietude. She wondered if there had been any eccentricity in the past "on poor dear Robert's side," and it had skipped a generation or two. One heard of such things!

Yes, the maternal view was different from Willy's. She retracted her suggestion that he should read for the Bar—it had been but a half-hearted compromise when she made it—and declared that the Cape offered him far finer prospects in every way. Mentally she decided it was just the plan "to take the nonsense out of him," and she answered her brother to the effect that his nephew would sail in two or three weeks' time, though she refrained from explaining to him the manner of young man his nephew was.

Somerset was not long in finding it out. He himself looked like a farmer—or what one expects a farmer to look like. He had a red face, and a

loud laugh, and was powerfully framed. His biceps might have been a gymnast's. Willy was a disappointment the moment he alighted from the train, being slightly built and consumptive-looking. And he had no conception of business: that was evident in their initial conversation. Without a suspicion as yet of the young fellow's tendencies, Somerset instinctively felt there was something wrong with him. The ignorance of things he ought to have known might be excused in remembering the kind of training he had had; but there was something worse than ignorance here: there seemed to be a hint of incapacity. Not only had he no ideas about making money, but he did not appear interested or intelligent on the subject, a fact which promised no brilliant future for him, considering that all he would have at the widow's death was three or four hundred a year.

Nevertheless, being responsible for his coming, Blake Somerset did his best for his relation, in a rough way.

"Look here," he said, after a few days, "I think broking will be about your mark here, youngster. You ought to earn ten or twelve pounds a week at it, if you're smart. I'll take you round the market to-morrow and introduce you."

Willy expressed himself as being much obliged.

"What do I do?" he inquired.

"Do? You sell the stones! You go into the

dealers' offices every morning and ask for parcels, and then you cut about into all the other dealers' and show 'em. It's a pity you don't know anything about a diamond, but you'll soon pick a smattering up. And you're always safe to say 'I've a nice little lot that will just suit you,' even if it won't."

The description was not very attractive to the Oxford man, but being already uncomfortably conscious that his uncle did not think much of him, he made a gallant attempt to simulate an alacrity he could not feel.

The introductions were duly effected, and, having procured a licence, Willy embarked on his career as a diamond broker without delay, equipped with a morocco-leather satchel furnished with many pockets, and designed to carry all the "parcels" that should be entrusted to him.

But he did not receive any. He had not effrontery enough. When he made his applications, he always asked if there was anything for him as briefly as possible, and slunk out mortified as soon as the man said "no," though he did not fail to observe that his more experienced competitors entered with a cheery greeting, an air of confidence, and sometimes "Such a good story! I must tell you, Mr. Meyerstein!" which proved much more effectual. Half an hour after the market opened he had usually repeated his

dreary formula in every doorway in the street, and obtained a negative in all. Then he returned to his hotel, and dreamed of fame and England. His uncle, hearing of this speedy retirement, told him that it would not do. If he wished to succeed, he must remain on the scene, and manage to look as if he were succeeding. Willy, with a heavy heart, took the hint, and from ten o'clock till four henceforward, with the thermometer at a hundred degrees in the shade, he bustled round and round the crooked little road, flourishing his empty satchel for all the world as if it were bursting with brilliants. But this assumption of doing an immense business did not seem to impress any of the dealers, who sat in their shirt-sleeves, gazing through the wide windows into the glare of sunshine outside, and they always replied that they were "not sending anything out this morning" when he called just the same.

At length Mr. Somerset wrote to his sister that he thought her boy had better return to Dulwich. He said wittily that there was "no opening on the Fields for poets"—he had discovered Willy's bent by this time—and warned her that living was expensive there. The future Laureate would loaf more cheaply at home. Mrs. Childers replied that she felt such surroundings were eminently desirable for the formation of

her son's character. He had no father, and a young man who did not seem to have any proper ambition would be a great responsibility for her to cope with alone. Perhaps by-and-by Blake might be able to put him into "a clerkship or something" that would enable him to keep himself decently? In the meanwhile the extra expense would not amount to so much as his passage would cost. Somerset, who had lost all interest in his nephew, accordingly looked about, and presently contrived to obtain him a post as desired. This being done, he washed his hands of him with a sigh of relief, and Willy went into the Magistrate's Court at Du Toits Pan, to keep the Criminal Record, and take affidavits of assault and other offences, at a salary of three pounds a week.

That was two years ago, and, as if to justify the low opinion Mr. Somerset had conceived of him, he was a clerk in the same place still.

This afternoon he was sitting at his accustomed desk in the breathless office, watching through the bars of the open window two or three Kaffir prisoners in charge of a police serjeant, waiting, until their names should be called, with their backs against a wall and their feet in the hot dust. Through the door which communicated with the shed-like court, he could hear the droning tones of the assistant magistrate disposing of the case in hand, and now the voice

of the interpreter shouting "Jan Sixpence! Piccanini! Tom Fool!" proclaimed that it was over, and that the turn had come of the negroes he could see.

The serjeant gave them a push, and they moved forward apathetically, drawing their blankets more closely about their skinny legs. The baking wall and the dust was all that was left to look at. Childers closed his eyes wearily —his sight had been troubling him of late—and leant back in his chair, wondering if life had any surprises in store for him, if anybody else on earth was so entirely wretched.

His faith in himself had deserted him by now, and he no longer foresaw himself a celebrity. He was very young indeed for confidence to have gone, but he was not naturally self-reliant, and it had been chaffed out of him. Without perceiving it, he was at this stage sick with an exquisite longing for sympathy—quite the last thing attainable here. In truth, he presented the most pathetic figure the world affords, though he was regarded in the camp as cutting a ludicrous one, for he experienced all the emotions of genius, and his Vesuvius brought forth a mouse; he was in temperament an artist, and in destiny a clerk. His verse was graceful; at times—much more rarely than he knew—there was a flash of something better than grace in

it, but in the force to set him free from the environment that was crushing him it was wholly lacking. He flapped feeble wings, like Sterne's starling in its cage, crying, "I can't get out!"

The interpreter brought in the list, for him to enter the misdemeanours and sentences in the record.

"Good afternoon, Massa Childers; I'm gwine home."

"Good afternoon, Mukasa."

II.

It was a quarter to five. Released from the bench, the assistant magistrate—a young man with a pink-and-white complexion, who had grown a beard in order to make himself look older—consulted his watch, and yawned.

"Heigho, poet!"

"Are you tired, sir?"

"Tired and dry. We'll have a liquor directly we shut the shop, shall we? By the way, the mail's in."

The assistant magistrate was always among the first to know when the mail was in, being engaged to a girl in England. Later on she would make her home here, and cry to be back in Clapham.

Childers was also dimly interested in the arrival of the mail. He had submitted his volume of poems four months since to the only firm of publishers left for it to go to, and it was within the bounds of possibility there might be a line by this time explaining the grounds of its rejection.

"Are they delivering yet?" he asked.

"I didn't hear," said Mr. Shepherd; "my letters always come to the club. I say, are you going to the theatre to-night?"

"I hadn't thought of it. Of course I shall go some evening or other; but I expect all to-night's seats are gone."

"No, they say there are still some left to fight for at the doors. All the best ones are gone, you bet—two pounds each!"

"Great Scot! Better than clerking—eh, sir?"

"Better than trying niggers in the Pan, too!" said the assistant magistrate. "Did you ever see her at home?"

Willy shook his head.

"Have *you?*"

"I saw her once, yes; in my last holiday. I don't know French, but I shall never forget it as long as I live. She *is* the greatest actress in the world, Childers, and no kid. She turns you inside out."

"I wish she played in English," said Childers,

filling his pipe; "she might just as well—they say she speaks it quite fluently. Have you got a match, *baas?*"

Rosa Duchêne had been tempted to Kimberley. There had been a rumour of her coming the year previous, but negotiations had fallen through, and a fever of expectation among the exiles, subsiding in disappointment, had been forced to console itself on the border of the Orange Free State with a prize-fight. Now the famous tragédienne had actually arrived. The local papers had been teeming for weeks with all the stock anecdotes about her which had been worn threadbare in the service of Paris and London a decade and more ago. Her eccentricities, her extravagance, her pet tiger-cub, and her eighty thousand pounds' worth of costumes—the public read the stories all over again, and enjoyed them. Such of the "stores" as sold photographs, had crowded their windows with her likenesses, and the walls of the corrugated-iron theatre, and the buffet beside it, were placarded with the magical name of Rosa Duchêne in letters five feet long. Every editor on the Fields had rushed in person to interview her, and in this morning's *Independent* three leaded columns detailed her "Impressions" of the place, which she had artlessly declared struck her as containing a larger number of handsome men and pretty

women than any city of its size she had seen. Even Rosa Duchênes cannot afford to neglect such "impressions."

Willy lit his pipe, and puffed at it with a sudden sense of pleasurable anticipation. Yes, he would go this evening, if he could get in! It would be an emotion tasted earlier than he had looked for it. Did Mr. Shepherd intend to be there?

Ted Shepherd said he did. The five-shilling seats were quite good enough for him, and they would go together if Willy pleased. He glanced at his watch again, and started.

"The devil!" he exclaimed, "we've stopped five minutes too long! Come on, poet, we'll go and have that drink!"

They picked up their wideawakes hurriedly, and strolled into the club.

The boy behind the bar had fallen asleep, and was dozing as peacefully as the flies would let him, for work in the mines did not conclude till "sun-down," and the establishment was almost deserted at this hour. Only a digger, whose enterprise had terminated by reason of exhausted capital, and a law-agent without any clients, and a medical man who had' many patients but seldom received his fees, were lolling about.

The civil servants had brandy-and-sodas, and the assistant magistrate played with the dice-box.

"I'll shake you who pays for both to-night, if you like, poet?" he said.

Childers nodded, and won, and ordered fresh brandy-and-sodas to celebrate his victory.

They had scarcely swallowed them when they became aware of an angry mutter mingling with the whir of the buckets and the throbbing of engines across the road, a clamour of impatient voices. The digger, who was looking at a picture of Hyde Park Corner in the *Illustrated London News*, and wondering how long it would be before he saw the original again, became aware of it also, and dropped the paper with a show of apprehension.

"I'm afraid that's about *me*," he said, turning rather pale. "This is very awkward."

"What's wrong, Johnny?" asked Shepherd.

"It's the 'boys,' I expect! You see, I couldn't pay them this morning; they'll hammer me if they get the chance!"

Childers went to the door, followed by everybody excepting Johnny Teale. A gang of some fifty niggers, Zulus, Kaffirs, and Basutos of all ages, had surged to the foot of the *stoep*—a low, gravelled veranda before the club—and were demanding their wages or Mr. Teale's blood.

"It *is* the 'boys,'" said Willy.

"I thought so. Well, tip 'em some of your verses, poet, and calm 'em down!"

"Why don't you pay the beggars?" said the law-agent, turning.

"Pay 'em?" echoed the ex-lessee of the Mooi Klip Mining Company. "That accursed ground hasn't yielded working expenses for weeks. Pay 'em? Do you think I'm the Standard Bank?"

The doctor exhorted him to come forward, and he came gingerly. His appearance was greeted with loud yells, and a hundred naked arms were lifted in execration and appeal. There was a touch of dignity, even of tragedy, in the instinctive way the African negroes lifted their arms that would have gladdened a London super-master's heart. Presently, however, by dint of fervid promises which he had no prospect of being able to fulfil, Teale succeeded in inducing the posse to depart, and, this consummation attained, dragged his supporters to the bar jubilantly.

Childers was not among them. He made his way instead through the dust and ox-wagons on the Market Square to the post-office, only to find the publishers had still not written, and then, retracing his steps, went into his room to lie down. His eyes were paining him badly, and he was sure that he saw even less clearly than he had done. The doctor had told him the trouble was caused by his "general condition," and advised him to rest his sight as much as possible. He had obeyed, but rest did not seem

to improve it, nor had the lotion or the tonic done any good.

Soon afterwards a scream of whistles piercing the air on all sides announced that the principal industry of the camp was suspended for the day, and now men poured up from the mines in shoals, to wash, and dine, and to exchange—to-night—their bedford-cords and loose jackets for the dress-suits which were relics of a European past.

In Kimberley dress-suits were donned more frequently, but Kimberley was three miles distant from Du Toits Pan, and by comparison quite fashionable. There were even men in Kimberley who wore stand-up collars and billy-cock hats every day in the week. And the theatre was there. Du Toits Pan had nothing except a tin chapel and a curate, who, it was supposed, preached in it. Nobody had been inside to ascertain.

It was early when Childers and his chief met again, and drove into the larger township as arranged, but a respectable crowd had collected under the electric lamps of the Main Street already, and when the doors opened, and the pair at length gained seats, they squeezed themselves into them battered and breathless.

A long procession of "carts" sped over the bare connecting road in the next half-hour, and, reaching the "Rush," was momentarily reinforced. Comparatively small as the theatre was, it appeared

to those in it to contain the entire population of all the camps. Not a familiar face seemed missing, and further recognitions followed at every turn of the head. When the orchestra came in, the house looked like a hill of white arms and bosoms and shining shirt-fronts. A novel and agreeable flutter of suspense stole through the audience, and by a common impulse women glanced and smiled towards one another with little, excited nods. Many had forgotten for the instant where they were, and in fancy were transported to the *Français* or the *Gaiety* where they had seen Duchêne last.

Some touch of the electric current communicated itself to Childers upstairs, and when the three portentous knocks sounded, he leant forward eagerly. The piece was La Dame aux Camélias. It begins, as all the world knows, with a conversation between De Varville, who stands with his back to the fire, and the maid. Childers strove in vain to follow it. With the plot he was acquainted, but the dialogue he could not understand.

The house was not very attentive. Many there did not understand it either, or understood it merely from a knowledge of the English version. They were impatient to behold Duchêne—Duchêne who had had the temerity to sign an engagement for this Heaven-forsaken desert.

There was the entrance of Nichette; De Varville's comment on her name; and at length the expected peal of the bell, and the servant's exclamation, "C'est mad'moiselle!"

She came on in her best style—while the women present caught their breath at her gown—affecting unconsciousness that an audience was criticizing her. But they would not have it—they were too grateful to her. The applause broke out vociferous and sustained. The "Diamond Fields" was welcoming the only important actress who had come to bless them, and it was a minute and a half before she could speak her first line.

As the act proceeded, Childers found his throat tightening queerly. The story has been as well abused as any ever penned, but sickly, unhealthy, morbid, or not, it is a story that appeals to almost every imaginative young man who is born. It fascinates him strongly as it unfolds; perhaps he, too, may one day meet a Marguerite—in secret he has often wished to do so! And he identifies himself with its hero, who is so splendid in his romance and passion on the stage, and in the book, by his own confession, as arrant a cad as ever escaped having his head punched. It has an infinitely greater recommendation from a theatrical point of view—it is an opportunity for a leading actress which few modern dramas

equal, and to-night Duchêne, who had carefully selected it for her opening performance, availed herself of the opportunity to the fullest.

She was at this time nearly forty years of age, but behind the footlights she did not look a day more than twenty-five. Her grace, her power, the tricks—which in their apparent spontaneity concealed such cleverness that it demanded a fellow-player to appreciate them as they deserved—took one novice among the spectators by storm. At the end of the second act he felt he was in the presence of a revelation. In the third, the tears were dripping down his face, and he tried furtively to wipe them away with a corner of the programme, afraid that Shepherd would ridicule him.

The result of Willy Childers' going to see Rosa Duchêne was really a foregone conclusion; gunpowder had met the spark, and only one thing could happen. A poet—that he was a pseudo poet matters very little—who had been eating his heart out on the Diamond Fields was confronted for the first time in his life with a beautiful woman who was a genius. When the play was over, and the people rose and screamed at her, Willy did not scream; he kept his seat, quivering hysterically. He was wrenched by the death he had witnessed; the agony of the lover's cry was in his own soul. He wanted to walk away

somewhere alone. The companionship of Shepherd was torture to him, and he thought he would have given anything that could be named to be able to go to her and stammer out all that she had made him feel at her feet.

Reduced to words, such exaltation is apt to sound very absurd, but, closely examined, there is much less absurd in it than there seems. After the illusion of intimate confidence created by sympathizing with a great actress through the range of emotions she represents—laughing with her laughter, and grieving with her when she grieves—one leaves the theatre having seen nothing of her real nature at all. But has one been shown much more of the young girl's, dressed in her best, with whom one falls in love at a dance? Both say things that are not natural to them through the evening, and the actress's pretence has, at least, suggested a disposition quite as adorable. One man would like to ask her to supper; another would make of her an ideal and an inspiration. It is a matter of temperament—which the fact that the actress would probably prefer the supper does not affect.

He escaped from Shepherd, and taking up a position by the stage-door, waited there in the hope of obtaining a glimpse of her when she left. The hope was not fulfilled, and she must have come out by another exit.

The intense dry heat, and the sun's blinding glare, had been replaced by a faint breeze, and as he drove home, his mind span more quickly for its freshness and the rapid motion of the "cart." He thought again of his volume of verse at the London publishers', and saw it accepted and successful. An unfamiliar excitement throbbed in his veins, and his imagination mounted beyond control, like a nightingale's voice, playing all sorts of pranks, unexpected and delightful, till it seemed lifting him into heaven itself.

It was only when the horses stopped that he perceived the lengths to which his illusion had carried him. From the stagnant "pan" came the croaking of frogs and the howling of innumerable stray curs. The mine yawned deeply in the night, and, like gallows, the skeleton erections round the reef rose blackly against a luminous sky. The click of billiard balls and a jingle of glasses issued from the club, but he did not go in. Something restrained him.

III.

Shepherd was the first to suspect what was the matter. Probably because he saw more of Childers than anybody else did; possibly because

incriminating compositions fell under his notice on the Government stationery—indeed, it is understood that the girl in Clapham received a tribute in verse from the assistant magistrate for the first and only time about this date;—anyhow it *was* suspected, and Childers' reception of the tentative chaff was as damning as a plain acknowledgment. And much more comical! It was voted altogether the most comical thing "the poet" could have done. "Childers in love," pure and simple, would have been an amusing object, but Willy Childers and Rosa Duchêne was an antithesis that tickled the risible faculties of Du Toits Pan to an extent wholly uncontrollable. It became the favourite pastime of the "Club" to lure him into the smoking-room and invent anecdotes about his divinity. He was old enough to have forgotten how to blush, but he had a marvellous capacity that way, and his face, while the stories were told, supplied them with a superfluous sauce piquante. And cartoons were made of him and pasted on the wall. In one he sang—

> "Ask nothing more of me, sweet,
> All I can give you, I give;"

and was depicted on his knees to the actress, with an ode in one hand and a child's money-box in the other. Life was made in various

ways a burden to him, though no one meant any wrong by the raillery. "Good morning; have you been to the theatre, Childers?" became the stock joke, a catchword with which he was greeted each day by everybody; and when he did go now, he slunk in late, and hid himself at the back of the gallery from sheer shame.

It was when three weeks of Duchêne's season of six had expired that the epidemic of chaff stopped; and it stopped with suddenness. Men spoke of Willy Childers for the first time in a tone of gravity. One morning he had not appeared at the Magistrate's Court; he sent instead a few lines in a painful sprawling hand to say that his sight was much worse—he was "afraid it was serious;" and a few days after that, the news circulated that he had gone blind.

In improving tales, when the misunderstood boy goes blind, all his acquaintances reproach themselves for their cruelty towards him, and flock to his "simple parlour" to listen to him talking like a tract, and derive a lasting moral from the patience he displays. It did not happen like that in Willy Childers' case, because none of the fellows had the faintest idea they had shown any cruelty, and with the exception of Ted Shepherd and one or two other very occasional visitors, he may be said to have passed his time in unbroken solitude.

It was of course useless for him to remain on the Fields any longer, and Somerset, who was going to England for a brief holiday in a few months' time, had arranged to take him home then, when a good opinion could be obtained, and perhaps an operation performed. In the meanwhile he was removed to the manager's cottage on the Fortunatus works, where a Kaffir went down to the Carnarvon Hotel to fetch his meals, and his uncle came, to sleep, between the hours of the club's closing at night and "sun-up" each morning. No language that could be employed could do anything like justice to the loneliness of his position there—to his helpless, hopeless misery. It was one of the things that may only be imagined. He had no one to talk to; he knew none of the pursuits by which the blind contrive, after years, to occupy themselves. He could only think, and compose verse in his head, while he sat passive in the blazing iron shanty, listening to the clamour of the machinery through the day, or the crooning of the Kaffirs crouching round their bonfires when the moon rose. And in this fashion a fortnight wore itself past.

Johnny Teale was the man! Others participated, and so were guilty—among them Blake Somerset—but Johnny Teale was the man who suggested the trick, let it be stated! There was

a girl in the Rush in those days popularly referred to as Poll Patchouli: she had opened a shop at the back of the Diamond Market, where she sold bad scent, after she left the "Ladies Orchestra" in which she had come to the Fields from Natal. What her name was really, was not known. She called herself Olive Esmond, but that has nothing to do with it. She was not considered pretty; she was in fact thought remarkably plain, even in a country where men are not exacting in the matter of feminine attractions, and a little comeliness goes a long way. She was, however, an amusing girl, and educated in a style; and a fortnight after Childers' retirement to the cottage opposite the Fortunatus tailings-heap, it transpired that she had a singular accomplishment: she could imitate Rosa Duchêne to the life. She did it so well, said an enthusiast who had heard her, that she might have obtained an engagement for it at Home at a music-hall. He said more—he said you could have shut your eyes, and sworn Duchêne was speaking.

It was precisely this criticism that gave Johnny Teale his idea. If you could shut your eyes and think Duchêne was speaking, she might be presented to a blind man as Duchêne herself!

The group to which he propounded it did hesitate. They objected that it would be blackguardly to play tricks with Childers now, and

demurred a good deal in an irresolute way; but Teale set himself to argue their scruples into thin air. For Childers to have a conversation with Polly under the impression she was the actress "would not do the poor chap any harm," he insisted—on the contrary, it would give him an immense pleasure; and as to the humour of the "sell"—well, he would defy anybody to assert that a practical joke of such magnitude had been perpetrated in the camp from the earliest days!

That was true, and a colossal temptation.

Demonstrating that the victim never need know; that no disappointment was entailed; that the chat would be no less delightful because the happiness was illusory, he at length carried his point, and Polly was interviewed and coached. A deputation went up to Kimberley to see her.

"We want you to help us in a tremendous spoof, Polly," they said in a breath. "You've heard of Willy Childers?"

No, she had not heard of him; who was he?

"Well, he thinks he's a poet, and he has lost his sight, and he's in love with Duchêne," explained Teale. "Now, we want to tell him we're going to introduce him to her, and then bring him to *you*—do you see? He'll make as violent love to you as he knows how, and you're to pretend to be awfully taken with him, and kid

him on—do you see? Of course you'll talk all the time like Duchêne, and end by vowing he's the only man in the world for you; and we—two or three of us—will be hidden about the place somewhere, watching the game—do you see? *You* know! do you think you can do it?"

The girl laughed. She was not disgusted by the infamous taste of the project; it struck her as being an uncommonly funny one.

"You may bet all you've got I can do it," she said; "rather! oh, by Jove, what a lark! When will you bring him, boys?"

"Well, it's got to be carried out artistically," said Teale; "one of us must go and mention that he has met her, and then, very kindly, say he'll try to obtain her permission to present Childers to her. He's simple enough, but it won't do to rush the thing through as if it were quite easy; he might smell a rat. Say Thursday, eh?"

"All right," said Polly, "Thursday; that'll do! Is he really 'gone' about her? I mean 'wild'?"

"Some! He'll tell you you're a genius and an angel, you see!"

She threw back her head and laughed again, and the deputation joined her.

"It'll be the biggest joke that was ever worked," she exclaimed; "I *shall* enjoy it!"

No time was lost in acquainting Willy with

the possible privilege in store for him, and the expressions of gratitude into which he broke made the conspirators feel almost as despicable for a moment as they really were.

Two days later, having left him the while in a state of suspense that bordered upon fever, Teale announced that Duchêne had consented to receive him in the company of Ted Shepherd and himself on the following afternoon. Half a dozen other spectators of the farce were to be concealed.

"I told her you wrote poetry," he said, "and —er—a good deal about you. It was rather cheek of me to make the request, considering I'd only met her once myself, but I wanted to do you a turn, sonny, and, after all, 'nothing venture, nothing have,' you know!"

Willy, who was trembling, groped for his hand, and pressed it when it was forthcoming.

Indeed he could scarcely realize that this bewildering thing had befallen him. It was actual —actual! he had to repeat it. To sit next to Rosa Duchêne and have her talk to him, even though he could no longer see her, was a prospect that beat through his consciousness in sick, almost terrifying throbs. It prevented him sleeping ten minutes during the night, and he passed the long morning waiting and praying to hear each hour strike on the little American

clock he had bought to let him know how the time went since his watch became useless for the purpose. When Teale and the assistant magistrate arrived at length, and guided him up into the "cart," the effort of replying to their questions was a pain, and it was a physical relief when conversation ceased and he could lapse into silence. The same tightness in breathing that he experienced in the theatre was mastering him, and the clip clop sound of the horses' hoofs as they sped along the road seemed raising echoes in his inside.

The hotel to which they were bound was not the Queen's, where Duchêne was in reality staying, but a third-rate one called the Royal, and his companions had misgivings lest he should detect the difference in the route. On reaching Kimberley, Johnny Teale began talking again eagerly, to distract his attention; but it was taking unnecessary trouble. His affliction was too recent, and his excitement too great, for the dupe to have such acuteness of perception.

The driver stopped, and Shepherd, who had agreed to come rather to see that the deception was not carried too far than because he looked forward to being amused by it, helped the blind man down, with his pink-and-white complexion pinker than usual.

They were met in the hall by a Kaffir servant

who had been carefully rehearsed in his part. He showed all his teeth in a grin of appreciation.

"Is Madame Duchêne in?" said Teale. "We are expected." Men do not carry visiting-cards on the Fields, and he sent up their names.

The negro disappeared, and returned after a few minutes to conduct them into a bare apartment on the ground floor, opening on to a *stoep* and a back yard. A small bedstead was at one end, with a washhand-stand at the foot. The rest of the furniture consisted of a chest-of-drawers, a chintz-covered couch, and a couple of basket-chairs. For decorations, a few coloured plates from the summer numbers of the English illustrated papers had been pasted on the walls.

"Madame Duchêne soon come," he said respectfully; "please wait, *baas*." Then he doubled himself up with silent ecstasy, and pointed to the window. Half a dozen bearded faces were welcoming them behind it; half a dozen arms waved wildly in the air.

"Great Scot!" exclaimed Teale, as the waiter retired, "We are in a drawing-room again, eh?" He emitted a soft whistle expressive of admiration and astonishment. "What do you think of it?"

"It's all right," said Shepherd, confusedly.

Teale nudged him and frowned.

"'All right'?" he echoed. "Well, I don't know what *you* were used to, my boy, but it's about as fine as anything *I* ever saw! Look at that embroidery, and those ivory things over there, and—— Why, the woman must be mad to cart such belongings about the world with her!"

"What's it like?" asked Childers, in a low, breathless voice.

"It's Oriental," said Teale; "shouldn't you call it 'Oriental,' Shepherd? Jove! I should like to see her flat in Paris, if this is the style of makeshift she goes in for for six weeks! What is that curious odour; don't you notice it?"

It was a pastille that had been set burning in the soap dish on the mottled mantelpiece. He affected to explore for it among countless treasures.

"This is it," he said; "in this swinging affair in the alcove among the palms! Why does she keep her rooms so dark, I wonder; do you like this subdued, cathedrally sort of light? Take care! Don't move, Childers, or you'll tumble over a silver idol on the floor near you! Stupid place to put it! Hark!"

There was a woman's step in the passage, and as they caught it, Willy turned a dead white. The group outside, who could see but not hear,

puffed their cigarettes and continued to stare in curiously.

"Here she is," murmured Shepherd; "stand up, boy!"

Childers obeyed as the door opened, and Polly came in.

IV.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," she said languidly. "Ah, monsieur, be seated, I beg!"

Her "monsieur" was the only false note, and of that he was no judge. Every pulse in his body leapt at her entrance; every nerve in him quickened with the rustle of her cheap little frock across the floor. To him it was brocade of a mysterious rose tint, and there was old lace upon her bosom.

She sank into one of the basket-chairs, and looked towards his companions for their approval, with her tongue in her cheek.

"I am very pleased to see you," she said; "your friends have spoken about you to me."

"You see one of your most ardent admirers, madame," said Teale, "and a poet. I'm half afraid that Mr. Shepherd and I are in the way at the meeting of two artists."

Childers lifted his hand in discomfiture.

"Don't make me absurd," he stammered;

"don't laugh at me, madame! I am not an artist, I only hoped to be one. But I am grateful—oh, ever so grateful—for your letting me come here. To have spoken to you will be something to remember all my life!"

The girl showed her teeth almost as widely as the negro had done.

"You are very—very—what is the word in English?—complimentary!" she drawled. "You must not make me vain, you know! And you are too modest also—is it not so, Mr. Teale? I am told your poems are quite charming."

Even Shepherd permitted himself a smile; she was doing it superbly. The spectators at the window pushed against one another, excited and inquiring.

"Will you not recite one to me?" she asked.

"Bravo!" put in Teale, "the very thing! Go on, Childers; let madame hear something you have done."

"I couldn't," said Willy. "Forgive me that, madame; I couldn't, indeed!"

"In Paris," said Polly, "many poets recite their verses to me. Yes, truly, you are too modest, monsieur! Well, as you please; then let us talk! You are fond of the theatre, eh?"

He bowed. "Passionately of late!" he answered awkwardly.

"Aha!" she cried, "but he can make pretty

speeches too, our modest poet! You, Mr. Teale, have not said anything so nice to me! But perhaps you do not feel it either?"

"Everybody raves about Madame Duchêne," observed Shepherd, "Mr. Teale and I among the rest."

He caught signals from the onlookers, and drew Johnny Teale's attention to them. They were growing impatient out there. The dialogue was lost upon them, and viewed as a pantomime the scene was dull. Polly saw the gestures too, and shook her fist at the crowd as an enjoinder to be still.

"To-night," she resumed, "I play one of my favourite rôles—Marguerite."

In point of fact she was mistaken: Duchêne played Frou-Frou; but Willy could not read the newspapers any more.

"I have seen you in it," he said eagerly, "I was at your first performance. I shall never see you in it again!"

"Why?" she said.

He flushed crimson.

"I said 'see'—I cannot see you at all."

"How long have you been like this?" asked the girl, deprecatingly.

"Nearly three weeks. It seems——"

"It seems a year, I suppose? It must!"

"Yes," said Childers, "it seems much longer

than it is. I dare say I shall get used to it by-and-by, but every day is a long while at first; I'm all alone, and there's nothing to do."

"It must be awful!" she murmured.

"Mr. Childers is going Home very soon," said Shepherd, "and then all of us poor beggars will be jealous of him."

"You and he may meet in London, madame," added Teale. "You'll go to the theatre next time Madame Duchêne plays in London, won't you, Childers? Perhaps she'll allow you to call on her there too?"

Polly shifted her chair irritably.

"Will you be able to go about in London, Mr. Childers?" she inquired.

"I do not know many people in England," he said. "I am afraid not. I shall be in Dulwich, with my mother."

"But you will make friends," she urged, "won't you? You won't be tied to the house always?"

"I shall not be a very lively companion; I do not think that many men will be anxious to be friends to me."

"Ah well," exclaimed Johnny Teale, "'a boy's best friend is his mother!' Ain't she, madame?"

"Gentlemen," said Polly, springing up impetuously, "I am sure that you two would like a cigar on the stoep! Don't move, Mr. Childers. They will come back to you!"

Teale stared in interrogation.

"You would like a cigar on the stoep!" she repeated; and as it was evident she meant to be obeyed, they said it was a very kind suggestion, and withdrew. Teale consoled himself with the idea that they were to be afforded the spectacle of Willy on his knees.

She did not speak for some moments after the door closed. She sat down in the chair Johnny Teale had vacated, with her back to the window. Her expression had changed, and her face was quite soft.

"Are you pleased they've gone?" she said.

"Yes," answered Willy, simply.

"So am I! I want to talk to you—I like you. Do you know, I never was so sorry for anybody in the world before?"

"You make me feel almost glad I'm blind," muttered Childers. "I—I've prayed to talk to you one day. I used to pray to see you too; but that's impossible now. That night——" He paused, afraid.

"What night?" said the girl.

"Your first night here. You know, I wasn't blind then, and—— This seems like a dream! Is it really you I'm telling it to!"

"It's me," said Poll Patchouli, her eyes shining. "And what? Don't stop."

"I came away praying to be great, only to

have the right to meet you! I have always wanted to succeed, of course—ever since I was a child; but that night it was different. It was to know you . . . to hear you say you had read my verse . . . to feel there was a sort of sympathy between us. Are you laughing at me?"

She put out her hand and touched him. She had given her hand to many men before, but never quite like that. Childers had a wild impulse to lift it to his lips, but did not—afraid again. She had hoped he would.

"Do you like me as much as you thought you were going to?" she said after a silence.

"Yes," said Willy; "you are just what I was sure you must be."

"Really?"

"Really!"

"That's good!" she declared, smearing a tear off her cheek with the hand that was not resting on him. "Shall you come again—I mean alone?"

"May I?" he cried. "Do you mean it? Oh, but how can I—I forgot! I can't go anywhere alone any more. This is the first time I've been out since I lost my sight, and you know Teale and Ted Shepherd offered to bring me."

"The beasts!" said Poll Patchouli in her throat.

"If I may come again *with them*——" he said diffidently.

"No, don't do that! Where do you live? Perhaps one day, since you're all by yourself, *I* may come and see *you*. But I don't want you to talk about it, if I do. I—— No, I never *shall* come!"

"Why?" he ejaculated. "Why not? I won't speak a word of it to a soul if you don't wish me to; but it would be a charity—I'm sure you'd have no need to mind. Oh, I would bless you, madame! *Please!*"

"Why do you like me?" she said sullenly. "You must be an awful fool to like a woman you don't know!"

"I do know you now," he murmured, shrinking. "And besides——"

"Besides—what?" said Polly.

"I had seen you on the stage; is that nothing?"

"Never mind the stage. Imagine you've only seen me here to-day."

"Well?"

"You want me to come?"

"I implore you to!"

"Oh yes, because I'm Duchêne! If I weren't a great actress, you wouldn't care a button whether I was sorry for you or not. Well, what is the address?"

"I'm in the manager's cottage—Mr. Somerset's cottage—on the works of the Fortunatus Mining

Company," he gasped. "Any driver will take you to it; it's in Bultfontein."

"I know!" she said.

"You know?"

"I mean I have heard the name! No, my acquaintance with the Diamond Fields is not so extensive as all that, monsieur. But I will find it, and I will come."

Her accent was much more marked in the last sentence than it had been a few moments ago, but its resumption was unnecessary. If by degrees she had dropped the voice of Rosa Duchêne altogether, it is doubtful whether he would have remarked it. The first impression had been all-powerful, and he was drunk with delight.

Indeed, when the "entertainment" was over, he was the only one entirely satisfied with it. Johnny Teale and his party felt that the hoax had "panned out less brilliantly," on the whole, than it promised; and Polly, alone in her room, threw herself on the bed, and cried miserably without knowing why.

V.

It was a significant fact that she did not call upon him for three days, though she wanted to do so very much. It was significant also that

when she did go, she put on her prettiest hat and frock, and made herself look as dainty as she could, though the young man would not be able to see her. Her visit intensified that unfamiliar emotion with her, pity for a man, and the step once taken, she went again—without any vacillation—and Bad Shilling was despatched for meals for two from the "Carnarvon," and their afternoons were so pleasant that the stars were sometimes out before they parted.

There was now demanded of the girl an infinitely more difficult achievement than that required at the Royal Hotel; she found herself expected to realize, and respond to, an artist's aspirations. She could not do it, quite; the suspense in which he waited for the publishers' reply, for instance, was outside her range of comprehension. But if she simulated more sympathy than it was natural she should feel, she did by degrees come to gain a glimmer of the blaze within him too. She had to strain for it hard at first—so hard that she was surprised at her own patience; his confidences were meaningless to her, foreign; but during those long afternoons and evenings while Willy talked to "Rosa Duchêne," as he had never thought to find himself talking to any one, Polly sat opposite him in the rocking-chair with attentive eyes, learning a lesson.

Once, just as she was leaving, Blake Somerset came in. He had heard that his nephew was receiving visits from a "lady" in the cottage, and guessing who the lady must be, intended to put a stop to them. He was rather ashamed of himself for having allowed the joke to be played at all, and the discovery of the lengths to which it had been carried annoyed him.

Polly started in alarm, but Childers, who had no cause to be embarrassed, performed, what he believed to be, the ceremony of introduction with perfect calmness.

"I don't think you have met my uncle," he said; "have you? Mr. Somerset—Madame Duchêne."

Somerset was about to answer with a brutal laugh, but a gesture from the girl checked him.

When they were outside, and out of earshot, she stopped and looked at him appealingly.

"Are you going to give me away," she said; "are you going to tell him? Don't! I'm not doing any harm. Please don't tell him!"

"This is dam nonsense!" exclaimed Somerset. "The fellow's a fool, but you've no right to have a lark like this with him, you know; it won't do!"

"I'm not doing any harm," she insisted, "really! Of course it's a beastly shame in one way, but—but it does cheer him up, and give

him pleasure! You must see for yourself how much brighter he is! And—and if you tell him, you'll break his heart."

"Skittles!" said Somerset. "Don't talk such rot!"

"You'll break his heart!" she flared out. "Not that you'd mind much, I suppose, if you did. Well, go back and do it. Go in and say, 'That isn't Rosa Duchêne who comes to see you at all; it's a girl they call Poll Patchouli, and everybody's been kidding you!' Go on! Then you won't have to take him to England with you—because he'll be buried here before you start—and it will be you who'll have killed him, as sure as a gun!"

"Do you mean to tell me," said Somerset, blankly, "that you think he'll never find it out? You must be as daft as *he* is, 'pon my soul! Well, *I* don't care; do as you like—it can't last long, that's one thing! When are you coming to see the idiot next?"

"I'm coming to-morrow!" said Polly. "And if you consider it all so shocking, I wonder you let those cads bring him to my place when they did. At all events I don't jeer at him, as you meant me to!"

Then she jumped up into the "cart" and drove away, and Somerset dropped into the club, and told Johnny Teale that, extraordinary as it

sounded, he honestly believed "that girl had taken a fancy to the simpleton;" and the little posse of conspirators sat and viewed the development of their plot with open mouths.

It had been her intention that the imposture she was sustaining should conclude with the actress's departure; and it was only when the time came that she perceived how strange a hold it had established on her, and how much she liked the young man who talked to her of things that she had never heard talked about before. The temptation to continue the intercourse was too strong to be resisted, and prompted by the fact that Duchêne's season had been extended a week, she told him, when she went on the morrow, that it was prolonged for six.

Childers' joy was pitiful to behold. He had been happier of late in his blindness than he had ever been while in possession of his sight, and the sudden intelligence that his paradise would endure, when the groan of its closing gates was already in his soul, was a relief so intense that its outcome frightened her.

She had been aware he was in love with her from the commencement, but now she saw how wildly, and was aghast. Her life had not accustomed her to regard the attachment between the sexes as a serious matter, and though she did not view her deception lightly any longer,

she had not grasped the full responsibility of it either till then.

She gazed at him wildly, with trembling lips, like a child who has smashed something.

"Are you so glad," she faltered—"so glad as all that?"

The consciousness crept through her as she asked it, that she too was glad—not in the whimsical way she had thought, but as a woman is glad to remain with a man who has grown dear to her. She moved slowly over to him, and took his hands down from his face, and dropped on her knees before the chair, staring up at him—wondering at them both.

"Willy," she whispered, "say something to me—I love you!"

He could not answer, but she felt what she had done, and she forgot then that the whole thing was a lie, forgot what an exclamation would burst from him if he could see her; and it was she herself whose kisses he was returning; herself by whom the tremors that shook him were being caused.

The deception had gone further still, and there began for the blind man a period in which he tasted all the triumphant rapture of possessing a beautiful and celebrated woman whom he adored. When he embraced Polly, his delusion gave him Rosa Duchêne in his arms; when

Polly clung about him, it was Duchêne's touch that thrilled his blood, and Duchêne's lips that burned. He lavished on Polly the madness of the passion which Rosa Duchêne inspired, and saw with his brain the form of the famous woman who intoxicated him, while Polly the insignificant was lying on his heart.

The ecstasy of the delusion dizzied him. Rosa Duchêne was his own; visited him daily; vowed she was wretched when they were apart! She, a genius whose name was renowned all over the world, discussed the prospects of his poems' acceptance with him, and entered into his hopes and fears! Why was he a nobody? If he could only climb nearer to her own altitude!

One afternoon, a fortnight later, when Polly went to the post-office to inquire if there was anything for him, she found that the reply for which he was waiting so anxiously had arrived at length. She could see from whom the note was, by the publishers' name on the envelope, and the roll of manuscript which the clerk also handed to her explained the nature of its contents. She took them, almost as disconsolate as her lover would be, and wondered on her way to the cottage how she was to break the news to him, how she could be gentle enough.

He had come out on the *stoep* to listen for her. He knew where she had been, and the eagerness

on his face made the words she had to speak more repugnant to her still.

"Dearest!" said Childers, and then waited.

"There is a letter," said Polly, reluctantly; "I haven't opened it yet." The bundle of rejected manuscript oppressed her, and she put it down on the table with her sunshade.

"From *them?*"

"Yes."

"Read it," he begged breathlessly. "Read it, Rosa, for Heaven's sake!"

She opened the envelope slowly, looking not at it, but at him. It was hateful that it should be she who had to bring him the disappointment! The colour was fluttering in his cheeks, and the thin hands held out towards her quivered. Suppose she told him a fib? Suppose she said—? He couldn't *see* the answer! She caught her breath as the notion flashed into her mind, and Willy heard her.

"They have taken it?" he cried.

She was endeavouring confusedly to perceive what difficulties such a falsehood would entail, but his question decided her; she *could* not crush him with the truth after that!

"Yes," she said in a low voice, "they have!"

"Rosa, Rosa! Oh my God! Read it to me! What do they say?"

"They say—" she said. "Oh, darling, I am

so glad for you, so glad! Willy, aren't you happy? I told you it would be all right, now didn't I!"

"What do they say?"

"They say—how can I see, if you hold me so tight, silly boy? It is only a line! 'Dear Sir, we shall be pleased to publish the poems you have submitted. They will be'—what is it?—'they will be brought out soon.' Nothing more! So—so perhaps they aren't going to pay you for them; but you won't mind that, will you? They will publish them! And—they say 'pleased.' They might have said 'willing,' but they say 'pleased'!"

To her the communication she had invented sounded very meagre; but she need not have striven to apologize for it. To him the bare fact was more than enough. They were going to issue his book. He would hold it—fondle it—have it in his clutch! And soon! He had been thirsty all his life, and on an instant Fortune was raining her favours on him with both hands. Balzac's expression of every artist's prayer recurred to him, "To be celebrated! To be loved!" He marvelled—crazy with rejoicing—that he could be so calm in the face of miracles. He dominated Rosa Duchêne, and now his *Reveries* was to be given to the world! Then a frightful misgiving seized him.

"You haven't deceived me? It is true?" he gasped.

"It is true!" said Polly. "How could you think such a thing?"

They embraced again, and he told her how proud she should be of him by-and-by.

"You will 'make' me, lift me!" he panted. "If I have written these before I knew you, what shall I do now! I shall be great; Rosa, I shall be great! The man you love will be known too—*you* will have done it for me! What a beautiful world we live in; is it the same world that was so ugly the other day? Life is a cheval-glass—it reflects the attitude in which you look at it. O darling Life, it blows kisses back to me! You fill me with emotions and ideas, that tumble over one another. I shall pour them out in my work—my mind and heart are bursting sometimes, too small to hold all you wake in them! I will dedicate every book to you—to you who will have inspired them all! Oh, I thank God I am a poet! To worship you as I do, and be able to lay nothing at your feet would have been agony!"

He wandered about the room with her arm round him, while her troubled gaze turned from time to time to the package on the table.

"Did you believe I was an artist when we first met," he broke out again, "or was it pity only?

Did you feel we had something in common, different from the others? Oh, how vain of me that sounds! But you know—you know how I mean it!"

"I know," she said.

"And you did—you did feel there was a bond between us? Tell me. I want so much of you dearest! I want more, and more, and more every day. I want more than I can tell you, and more than the utmost! It's as if nature hadn't provided for such a love."

"What can I do?"

"You know your thoughts before you speak them! I'm jealous of that."

"You're mad!"

He nodded. "I dare say. Nothing satisfies me. But I can't see you—if you knew how I strain! I'd give my right arm to see you now, Rosa! Turn your face up, and let me try. Great God! it's a wonderful thing to be born a woman — and yet somehow it doesn't seem enough to be a man. One day I'll try to tell you how you make me feel. If I can do it, it'll be the grandest poem that was ever penned. And such a relief!"

When she left, the moon was shining. She slipped the package under her cloak, and, reaching home, hid it away remorsefully at the bottom of her trunk. What would be the outcome of

this lie she had told? She upbraided herself for her cowardice bitterly; but for him to learn that the work was rejected now would be a blow a thousand times more terrible still. No, now whatever happened, he must not know; he would curse her!

VI.

In the night the remembrance struck her that she had left the note in his possession, and she was seized with a paralysing dread that he might show it to Somerset, and discover the truth with the rudest shock possible. The thought kept her awake, tossing in agony, and the sun had scarcely risen when she drove to Bultfontein with a face of ashes.

Willy was not visible. He was dressing, with the aid of the negro who attended on him. She sank on to the first chair inside the door, and tried to gather voice to call to him.

He entered from the bedroom almost at the same moment, and his appearance indicated the occurrence of all that she had feared. His greeting, however, dispelled her alarm, and he explained.

"I have had news about my mother," he murmured; "she is dead."

The mail carrying Childers' poems had also brought a letter for Mr. Somerset. Mrs. Childers had opportunely died of pneumonia—thus avoiding the arrival of "a son who had no proper ambition," and who was now blind besides. Somerset had had a long talk with him the previous night after Polly's departure. The widow's decease placed considerable difficulties in the way of the young man's return to England. The manager was going merely for a trip, and a few months would see him back on the Fortunatus works again. There would, he pointed out, be nobody now to take charge of Childers at Home when he left, or, for that matter, while he remained. It was really an awkward thing to determine what was to become of him! A young man who had inherited about three hundred and fifty a year had seldom been so entirely in the way before.

All these facts Childers imparted to Polly.

"What I shall do isn't decided," he went on. "I couldn't stop here permanently, even if I wished to. With the best of intentions I'm bound to be rather a nuisance. It wouldn't be fair for a fellow like me to quarter himself on an uncle for life, if he were willing to have me!"

"Have you told him about your book?" she asked.

"No," answered Willy; "it wouldn't interest

him, and we talked about my mother's death. No, I didn't say anything."

"And I wouldn't, if I were you!" she exclaimed. "I wouldn't say anything to a soul till it is printed. Let it be a surprise to them all, and a secret, till the right time comes, between us two."

"That was what I meant," he said. "'Between us two,' darling, yes."

She passed the day at once in relief and dismay; it was piteous to think of the loneliness of his situation. She could not have loved him more tenderly if she had been his sister or his wife, and this further complication which had arisen to harass her, appeared temporarily the gravest of them all.

Willy also was troubled. Not only by his mother's loss, but by a passionate longing to propose to Rosa Duchêne a sacrifice which he told himself would be too much to beg. He had not exaggerated in asserting that he felt he was a burden on his uncle, and, though Rosa loved him, he doubted if she, too, would not be reluctant to let him travel to England in her society, and constitute herself his constant companion till it was ascertained whether an operation could be performed. Yet if he were to go, he saw no alternative.

The solution of the dilemma must have presented itself to her, he thought, sailing shortly as she would be; but she had not suggested it, and

for him to do so was impossible. A little constraint crept into his conversations with the girl now, and while she inwardly commented and speculated on the difference, he was tremulously waiting in every pause for her to make the offer that had never entered her head. Their dream might have been continued in England more deliciously than he had ever dared to hope, and, instead, they were to be divided entirely by her own indifference! He was bitterly wounded, and not even his anticipation of his book arriving—the subject on which he chiefly talked with her in order to disguise the one that engrossed him—was potent to banish the mortification from his mind.

If his allusions to that were made perfunctorily, however, their effect on his listener was disquieting enough. The first of the consequences of her lie was at hand to worry her already. She repented that she had said "soon" in her improvised acceptance, and wondered how soon a publisher's "soon" might mean. Childers was equally ignorant on the point, and in answer to her nervous queries, declared that the copies might reach him any week.

She could do no less after this than pretend to go to the post-office every mail-day to inquire for them, and affect to be disappointed as she informed him that nothing had come. She groped

perplexed in the labyrinth of her creation, questioning helplessly how to sustain it. If the truth were exposed at this stage, she was certain she should make away with herself; she would have done him the cruelest, the most cowardly wrong imaginable! Her only excuse for the deception was that, so far, it had been attended by success. If the avalanche fell after all, it would be the end of her; she would be like that girl who had taken carbolic acid in Bultfontein Road the other day, and was found in a blue heap on the floor!

After each mail she drew a breath, reflecting thankfully that she had gained another respite; but when four had been delivered, she feared that the delay was as long as he could be expected to put faith in, and facing the inevitable with the courage of despair, nerved herself to perpetrate a bolder stroke than she had planned yet.

While she was considering it, all prospect of Childers making the voyage with his uncle was extinguished definitely. The latter was starting at once, at a couple of days' notice, for a very flying visit indeed. His subordinate on the Fortunatus had been offered a better appointment, and it was necessary the manager's vacation should be taken while the other was still on the works. Willy would be more than ever an encumbrance under these circumstances.

Somerset explained that he would make time

to see the solicitor to the estate, and endeavour to effect some arrangement for the boy to be looked after in London—there were always fellows going over; he could travel with some one else later on—but to take him himself was wholly impracticable.

Willy did not remonstrate, but the end of the additional six weeks which he believed Rosa to be playing in Kimberley was terribly near now (Rosa Duchêne, as a matter of fact, was at this time in Monte Carlo, dropping some of the Diamond Fields' receipts at the tables), and he felt hopelessly that the woman he loved was fading out of his life for ever. He could have cried with the pain of it.

He sat in the slip of a sitting-room the night before the departure, listening while Blake Somerset banged his portmanteaus about, and replying miserably to his cheerful remarks. Somerset was debating whether to drop the lad a hint about Polly, but thought he would ask Ted Shepherd to keep an eye on him instead. Childers was longing for him to be actually gone, that he might abandon himself to his wretchedness without restraint.

In the morning he did not feel his forlornness to so acute a degree when the sound of the "cart" wheels had died away, leaving him to the mercies of Bad Shilling for the next two

months, as he had done while the preparations were going forward; but the consciousness that they all found him an incubus, and shrank from saddling themselves with him, hung over him like a cloud.

His welcome of Polly when she appeared was the expression of the consciousness, and struck her with a chill. She put off her cape and hat, and, after a few abortive efforts to establish a warmer atmosphere, busied herself with the making of the tea, which had become one of the regular features of their afternoons.

At last, glancing over at him hesitatingly, she said—

"Has anything happened? You seem very quiet."

"No, nothing particular. My uncle has gone, that is all."

"'Gone!'" she echoed; "gone where?"

"He has gone to England. It was settled two days ago; didn't I mention it?"

"No," she said, "you didn't. It is rather strange you should have forgotten such a thing. Then you are alone here altogether now, you poor boy—all night too?"

"Yes," he answered, playing with her discarded gloves; "all night too."

But he did not say any more, and with a stare of puzzlement, and her face a little paler, she

continued her occupation silently. She had lit the wick of the spirit-lamp, and filled the kettle, and now stood waiting for the water to boil.

"It is boiling, Rosa," said Childers; "I can hear it."

"I was thinking of something else," she said, starting. "There! It will be ready in a few minutes."

"What were you thinking of?" he asked, after a moment's pause.

"Of—— What's the difference?" said the girl.

"*I* was thinking too."

"I know." She ran over to him impulsively; and bent over the chair. "Willy, we aren't the same to each other! What is it? Tell me. You aren't as fond of me?"

He laughed—or sobbed—in derision.

"It's you!"

"I?"

"Oh! don't make me say it. You know as well as I do I shall be alone in this Heaven-forsaken hole, and that, for all one can see, I may end my life in it. *He's* gone, and *you're* going! Picture me here sometimes; it's a charming apartment, isn't it, and I'm a pretty figure to look back on! You will have a unique recollection; you'll always be able to think of 'the absent one' just as you left him! That's the advantage of knowing a log!"

"Willy!" she cried. "What do you mean? Why do you——?"

"I shall see more of Bad Shilling after you're gone—if he's kind! I shall learn to quite look forward to his remembering me, and listen for his big black feet on the boards as I used to listen for *you!* Has 'anything happened'? Oh my God!"

"Why do you talk to me like this?" she exclaimed excitedly. "Don't you think I'm sorry for you enough? You talk as if I could help it; *how* can I help it? If I can, tell me the way! I'll do it. I'd love to do it. You reproach me for nothing!"

The boy's eyebrows were lifted significantly, and she flung herself on him in a whirlwind of interrogation.

"If I can help it, tell me the way! You *shall* tell me. I don't know what you mean—I swear I don't. I won't let you go till you tell!"

"You—haven't thought?"

She shook her head vehemently.

"Answer! Oh, I forgot—I was shaking my head! No, no, no; I do *not* know, Will!"

"You will refuse if you want to?"

"Answer! Yes, I will refuse if I want to. Answer me!"

"We—you and I—might go to England together."

Her clasp of his neck loosened, and she lay in his arms limp with dismay. This, the natural course in the rôle she was assuming, was the last complication she had contemplated.

"How?" she gasped.

"You don't wish it!"

"Yes, yes; I do, I do. But how?"

"It would be quite easy. Let your Company go on ahead, and we can follow by another boat. I have thought of everything. Thought! I've thought of nothing else! In that drawer there's my money—you would take it, and get our tickets to Cape Town. I don't know exactly how much money there ought to be, but there is nothing like enough for our passages, and when we got down to the Colony, I should wire to the lawyer, and he could cable me out a hundred or two. Well, and then——"

"Go on," muttered Polly, feverishly, "go on!"

The blessed revelation that he did not expect her to pay for her own passage—a matter that would have been as impossible for her as to buy the Kimberley Mine—had brought the colour to her cheeks again. The one question that was dizzying her now was how it would be practicable to sustain his delusion about her identity if they travelled on a steamer full of people.

"Well, and then, when we were Home, we

would go to a great oculist—a very great oculist —somebody who sits in his consulting-room like a judge, and charges a guinea a minute. Or perhaps a German—yes, we might go to a German, who doesn't look like an oculist a bit, but is marvellously clever, like the one in 'Poor Miss Finch'—and he'd give me back my sight—my sight! my sight! And I could see you when we kiss!"

She yearned round at him with wide eyes, pitiful and afraid.

"To think it should never have struck you! Rosa, I've been breaking my heart because you didn't suggest it. I thought you didn't care for me any more—that you had grown tired. Won't it be glorious! I shall see your beautiful face close at last, and it will be you who helped me to do it. Sweetest, tell me we are going—it seems too wonderful to be true! Say it!"

"We shall go," she said. She put her hand through the open window, and pulled at the water-bag that was suspended in a temperature in which no ice would keep. Roughly made of canvas, like a small pillow-case sewn up, with the neck of a beer-bottle inserted for a spout, Bad Shilling filled it with the lukewarm, undrinkable water every day to hang in the air. The iciness of its contact with her forehead now cleared her brain.

VII.

Beside the stupendousness of this new difficulty, the necessity for meeting his demand for the copies of his *Reveries*, which she had dreaded so, appeared a simple matter enough; and when she came next, she placed a parcel on his knees with so little misgiving that she was surprised at herself.

The poet uttered an ejaculation of delight. "My book! It must be my book!"

She told him to cut the string, but his fingers shook so that he could not manage it. He fumbled futilely in his impatience.

"Oh," he cried, "I can't! Rosa—you!"

She took the penknife from his hand, and afterwards let him unfold the wrappings for himself. Six volumes met his touch with an electric thrill—alike, identical—but each to be caressed separately, each lovable and delicious. How smooth was the delicate surface that he stroked—soft as a woman's palm! He was holding his first-born, and he thanked God. The emotion was the true emotion, though it was conjured up by fraud; it was the bliss of ignorance, but, none the less, bliss. He was holding his first-born, and Polly had given him no meaner a joy than Heaven would have given had it endowed him

with the powers which he fancied he had displayed. Six copies of another work, and imagination were as potent as reality.

"Tell me what it is like," he whispered.

"It is," she said, "a pale, curious fawn. The edges are stained a deeper shade, and the name of 'William Childers' is at the bottom of the cover a little to the right, in dark antique lettering."

"Let me trace it! Show me!"

She obeyed, terrified, watching his effort breathlessly.

"I cannot make it out! But it looks well, Rosa, eh? It looks well?"

"It looks beautiful!" she said.

"The paper is thin," he murmured; "I hoped they would have given me better paper."

"It is thin," she confessed remorsefully, "but very *good* looking. I think it looks more uncommon on the whole than if it had been thick."

"And the type—big? Is there a wide margin?"

"There is a very wide margin," asserted Polly. "Give me your finger again—there, all that is margin! And the type is splendid! I can read it from here, without bending." She could. She read: 'The Norman Conquest. Edward was not a vigorous King; he had little authority, while——'

He cuddled the book close with a long-drawn sigh of content.

"Perhaps soon I shall be able to see it!" he exclaimed. "Rosa, when do we go—need we wait long? I am on fire! But, oh, I am happy too—happy, happy! I am happier than I ever hoped I should be, although I have no eyes. Since I knew you, my whole life has changed; you have given me love, and you are bringing me success! How can I repay you!"

Suddenly a passionate desire seized him. "Read me the first poem," he prayed, "read me *Sic Itur ad Astra*. Let me hear my verse spoken by you!"

The blood fell from her face, and she stood speechless. Her head was swimming.

"Rosa!"

"Wait!" she stammered, recovering herself; "it is new to me. You are a poet, and it is new to me! Wait until I know them, Will—I have a reputation to lose!"

She thanked her guiding star she had kept the manuscript, and he, his disappointment passing, thought how sweet this timidity in such a woman was. He told her so, with triumphant tenderness. She resolved he should have plenty occasions for the triumph in the future.

She had proposed that on the journey before them, she should adopt his own surname, explaining

the unavoidable request by pointing out that while Duchêne's features might be familiar to many, Duchêne's name would be known to all, and prove a certain embarrassment in their position. In agreeing with this—which was specious enough—Childers had removed her initial anxiety from her mind.

Freed from it, she made, in the ensuing days, the needful preparations with less of fright in her soul, and now, since they were to go, she was sometimes eager for them to be gone quickly. There was just the contingency that a man might drop in on him, and an accident destroy the whole fabric of the deception she had weaved at the final instant. She strove to persuade herself she might preserve her lover's delusion more securely where she had only strangers to fear than she could have done on the Diamond Fields, but then her reason mocked her for the hope. So many things might happen—she dared not look forward. Alternately she longed and trembled for the hour that should see them start. She was fighting pluckily, but the enormity of the undertaking to which she had set her hand paralysed her in moments, and at every step she seemed called upon to vanquish a further obstacle that had not been suspected till it barred the way.

When the morning broke at length, her

predominant sensation was of pleasure. Her own trunks were ready, and while Bad Shilling was sent for their breakfast, she was busy packing the remaining things of Willy's. She was still on her knees, endeavouring to fasten the box, while Childers sat on it, when the "boy" returned. His additional weight—for he was a "boy" of about forty years, and weighing twelve stones—disposed of the difficulty, and, laughing after their exertions, they sat down to the coffee and steaks at the untidy table quite gaily, reminding each other that it was for the last time.

The negro had come back with a "cart," which stood waiting for them, and, the meal concluded, they made haste to depart. As they mounted and took their seats, the doors of the cottage and all the sheds about the works banged violently; the sunshine sank, and the long, low swishing sound was heard that heralded a dust-storm. In another minute the air was darkened as by a London fog; windows rattled, and they hid their faces in their hands, in the vain attempt to shield them from the hissing clouds that whirled and stung. Such dust-storms were of constant occurrence, but in this one the little Hottentot Jehu appeared to perceive a significance, and he lashed forward the horses furiously. They had gained the station before the rain he

had foreseen began to fall; but it did fall—in floods—sweeping less fortunate animals off their feet; and Polly's cheerfulness deserted her as she glanced back into the deluge, and she felt superstitiously that the adventure had commenced under ominous conditions.

VIII.

However, the thirty odd hours in the train were uneventful, and they reached Cape Town without any new danger having reared its head. Exhilaration was in the ascendant again. The comparative freshness of the atmosphere, the sparkle of the sea beyond the jetty to her, and the scent of it to him, the odour of flowers and rustle of the trees, were delicious after the desert they had left.

And he drove in a hansom again—a white hansom, with a coloured driver truly, but a hansom! They went straight to a little inn, of which Polly had heard, outside the town, almost, it seemed to her, at the very foot of Table Mountain, whose squareness broke off so sharply against the intense blue sky, and here, obtaining rooms—the entire inn was at their disposal, if they had wanted it—sat down and smiled at each other from sheer delight.

"How *clean* everything feels!" said Childers. "Isn't it? There's a feeling of cleanness about the towels, and the chair-covers, and the curtains, that is an absolute novelty to me!"

He had expressed just what she was thinking. It *was* clean, and outside it was green and tranquil. The road that the hostel overlooked was at this part an avenue of firs, glinting here and there with branches of the silver-leaves which are sent to England as birthday cards, with stiff little views or sentiments painted on them. Presently a Malay maidservant—a starched, white triangle from the armpits down, and with a bright silk fez upon her head—came in with their dinner, and they tasted fruit once more; not fruit as it was procurable in Kimberley, but great luscious peaches, and purple figs, and a water-melon plucked since an hour, that gushed into their mouths. They sat dawdling by the window over their coffee while the moon rose, and now and again the thrum of a banjo was borne to them on the stillness; and Childers smoked a cigarette, because the situation seemed to call for one, though he only enjoyed it with his fingers now.

In the morning they took one of the trains that potter backwards and forwards between the suburbs and Cape Town, and sent the cable to the solicitor. But they were not impatient

for the money to arrive; they contemplated the two or three days they would have to pass here with great fortitude.

When the answer came, and they issued from the bank with a roll of notes in Polly's pocket, they went to the office of the line which had a boat sailing next, to engage their passages; and here they met with their first disappointment. All the berths were gone, and it was necessary for them to wait for the *Union* steamer, that left a week later.

It was disconcerting, but it could not be helped. After all, they were comfortable at the inn, and though Childers experienced more regret than Polly, he was not very seriously chagrined either. They walked home talking—for it was an agreeable walk after one had passed the tannery at Papendorp—and he confided to her his suspense until he had learnt how *Reveries* was received; the humiliation he would feel if the reviewers sneered at it. And then the girl told him what the scene about them looked like; of the fields of arum lilies, despised as buttercups in England, and the clusters of maidenhair-fern that fluttered in every hedge.

"Look!" she exclaimed once, inadvertently. "Oh! . . . I mean how sweet this is, Will, this villa! Those high cactuses—cacti, what do you call them—divide the garden from us, but here,

at the gate, one can see in. The lawn is yellow with loquat trees and crimson with japonicas. It's all patches of colour or of shadow. And it's got a perfect duck of a stoep, and—oh, a lovely old negress with white hair, who's coming down to us! Let's stroll on; she'd bother us to go over it perhaps—it's to let."

"We shall find a difference when we get to London, shall we not?" he remarked as they proceeded. "Fancy it! January! The cold, the wet, the black bustling crowd in the foggy streets, and the mud-carts slopping over with slush. What a contrast!"

"London has suburbs, too!" she answered hopefully. "Dulwich, where you lived, is a suburb, isn't it? It wouldn't be like that if we went to Dulwich?"

"No," he said, "we should not find a crowd in Dulwich, because the people who live there never go out; and there would be no mud-carts, because in deadly Dulwich the mud is never cleared away. But its long, dreary, desolate roads aren't like this one, Rosa, in the least."

Cape Town appeared to him, in spite of his affliction, much more attractive now than it had done eighteen months before, when he saw it. The thought occurred that he might utilize their enforced delay by consulting one of its medical men—he doubted its boasting an oculist pure

and simple—and obtaining a second and more authoritative opinion. He propounded the idea to Polly, and, on inquiry, she ascertained that the best man to whom he could go was an Englishman—a Dr. Eben Drysdale.

Very encouraging accounts were forthcoming of his ability. Though not a specialist, he had effected some remarkable cures in ophthalmic cases, it was affirmed, and Childers, who wrote to him through Polly for an appointment, grew strongly excited as the time for the visit drew near.

The girl herself did not know what to desire. When they mounted the steps of the house, her knees knocked together. To wish the man might say that no operation would succeed sounded so heartless that she was ashamed to look at Willy while the struggle with the hope was going on; yet to hear that his sight could certainly be restored would mean discovery to herself and despair to him. She often prayed, though to many it may sound improbable; and as they stood waiting on the doorstep to be admitted, she shaped an inward, irresolute prayer now. She said, "O God, You know all about it—help me to want the thing that he'll like best!"

Dr. Drysdale did not bear any resemblance to either of the imaginary authorities whose portraits

Childers had sketched in Bultfontein. He shook hands with his visitors, observed genially that it was beautiful weather, and received them as if nothing could be further than the existence of any anxiety from his own recollection or from theirs.

When Willy had finished explaining, he said—

"Yes, yes, to be sure," and tapped his teeth pensively with a thermometer that had been lying on the table. "Yes, yes, to be sure! And you are on your way back to the old country, eh? Well, now let us see! Let us have a look, sir!" He lifted the lids, and scrutinized the boy's eyes one by one under the rays of an adjustable electric lamp. "Yes, yes, to be sure! And how long is it since the trouble began?"

"My sight has been weak a long while," answered Willy. "It's been getting very bad the last eight months, and about nine weeks ago it failed altogether. At least I wore a shade for a few days, and then——"

"Yes, yes," said Dr. Drysdale.

"Can you give us any hope?" asked Polly.

The physician mused. "There is hope," he said, "there is hope. I wouldn't say that no one would advise an operation over there. You might go to Pholett or to MacIntyre—I dare say MacIntyre would do it—and it's just possible it might be partially successful; but I wouldn't

counsel it in this case; I wouldn't counsel it myself. Your husband?"

Polly bowed.

"Your husband, yes! I wouldn't counsel it myself. Do you think it is advisable, sir, to proceed to England for the sake of—er—this remote chance?"

"I don't understand?" said Willy, heavily.

"In your state of health it will be injurious in the extreme. Here it's quite the reverse—you've everything in your favour. My advice would be to stay where you are. Suppose they do see their way to an operation, what of it? Do you mind taking off your coat and waistcoat?—Thank you. Now draw a deep breath—that's it! Now again!"

"My lungs are not strong," stammered Willy, "I know; they never have been! But what you are implying is news to me."

Polly rose to her feet in consternation.

"Do you mean that he is ill, doctor!" she exclaimed—"very ill?"

"I mean," said Dr. Drysdale, suddenly evasive, "that I wouldn't recommend him to go to England, that's all. No need to be alarmed, my dear madam; don't let me startle you! It's not a climate we choose when there is a tendency to any pulmonary complaint, and—and your husband was perfectly aware that his lungs 'aren't strong.'"

There was a pause that lasted some time.

"We may as well go," said Childers, at length. "I am glad to have had your opinion. Good morning."

But as Polly went forward to the head of the staircase, he stopped, instead of following her, and spoke to the doctor again on the threshold.

"I want what you've seen, straight, please!" he said in a low voice. "If I live in England, how long shall I last?"

"One cannot say," murmured the other deprecatingly; "nature at times——"

"Roughly? I can bear it—I'm not a child! How long?"

"So far as I can judge from a very cursory examination I should give you about two years."

"Good God!" said Childers. "And here?"

"Here? With care, and the avoidance of anything like physical or mental excitement, you may live for ten! More! But you *must* avoid excitement, mind; it's imperative!"

The girl was returning, anxious to miss nothing. Childers caught the frou-frou of her skirt on the floor.

"If I can't avoid excitement," he questioned desperately—"if that's impossible?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"You will not live so long!"

IX.

Childers and Polly left the house, and turned into the street silently. She could not express her comprehension by any words, and loathed the passers-by, who prevented her taking him to her heart. To him the shock was awful, and he knew now the meaning of various sensations which he had mentally set down to lassitude and depression.

She squeezed the hand that rested on her arm against her side.

"My poor boy!" she said chokingly.

"It's—it's rather a blow, isn't it!"

The sky was of just as hard a blue as when they had entered, she noticed with dull eyes; the glimpse of bay sparkled just as fiercely; the same traffic was in the roads, producing muffled sounds.

"You must stop in Cape Town," she murmured, "and get well here. . . . Are we going back by train?"

"Yes," he assented drearily. . . . "Yes, I suppose by train."

His thoughts were not that his sight was lost for ever; not that England would never be anything but a memory to him any more; but that he and she would be divided now. *She* would go—perhaps a little later than they were to

have gone together—perhaps much later—but she would go.

"It was fated it seems!" he said.

"What?" she asked.

He had assumed that she must be thinking of it too. She was suffering with her own identity, and had not remembered to view the calamity as Duchêne.

"You will leave me out here, after all!"

"Leave you?" Then, realizing the position, she was staggered. Would Rosa Duchêne leave him? Or would she stay, regardless of everything else? She did not know! It looked incredible to her that the actress would consent to change her whole mode of life, to renounce her career, and make herself the jest of Europe, in order to remain by the side of Willy in Cape Town. And then she argued that it looked incredible, because the other woman was nothing but a great name to her, and that if she had loved him as he imagined she did, the actress would at this minute have been wrung with the identical distress she was experiencing herself. "We—we must consider," she said.

Would consent be equivalent to discovery? or would his belief in the devotion he had inspired be equal to accepting such a sacrifice without suspicion? She sat staring from the window of the railway-compartment, asking herself the

question as the train bore them homeward. She was now grateful for the presence of strangers; she did not want to speak.

On the platform Childers said—

"But what do I care—we will go together just the same! Rosa, I would rather be with you and die, than live and be left alone. Don't let us think about it any more; we'll go as we'd determined!"

"You must be insane!" she said, starting; "I don't want a suicide on my account."

He persisted, but she would not listen to him. All the afternoon she waited, trying to perceive whether he was ready to receive the suggestion she was aching to make.

During the evening they were both very quiet. She had wheeled her armchair to the sofa where he lay, and stooped from time to time to kiss him, but her sympathy seemed empty to him without the words he was yearning to hear, and to herself, till they could be spoken, it seemed that she was offering him an insult.

"When shall you sail?" he said, breaking a long pause.

"When you are tired of me," she answered.

"Ah, you will go before then!"

"Really?"

Coquetry appeared heartless to him. He wondered she could display any in such an hour.

"For the first time I wish you were a 'nobody,'" he sighed. "I've been too vain, perhaps, of being loved by Rosa Duchêne. Now I'm punished for it—it's your position that comes between us. Her lover, or her career—what woman would hesitate!"

He did not know it, or intend it, but the reproach that was her clue was in his tone. She shut her eyes, and shivered with joy before she spoke.

"I can't tell you what woman would hesitate," she said with a laugh; "but does it matter much?"

"What do you mean, Rosa?" faltered Willy.

"Supposing—" she said, curling a piece of his hair round her finger.

"'Supposing'?" he echoed breathlessly.

"Supposing that 'once upon a time' there was an actress who came to South Africa, and met a boy she—she was silly enough to like very much—silly enough to love very much—silly enough to love as *I* love *you!* Suppose they had meant to go Home together, and then one morning learnt the boy was much too ill, and that the woman must give up everything to stay there with him, or go away alone, and give up him. If through that first, long, dreadful day she wasn't able to decide; if just at first she did hesitate; if she tried to stamp her love out, only to find—what

she might have known at the beginning—that it was worth more to her than the stage, more than her Paris, more to her than her life; if she cried to him, 'Willy, I'm ashamed of myself! Forgive me, and let me stop!'—what do you think the boy would say?"

"Rosa!"

"I love you, I love you, I love you!" she muttered, straining him to her.

"You will not have so long to wait as you think!" he said.

"You will live for ever," she swore; "you shall be immortal!"

They went the following day to view the tiny house whose exterior had delighted her so in passing. It was to be let furnished, and the old, white-haired negress she had seen in the garden was prepared to remain as servant. They settled to take it on the spot, and less than a week later they were installed.

The afternoon that they moved in, Polly went into town alone. She explained that she wanted to buy some trifle—a shade for the lamp—and Willy, who was taking as vivid an interest in the arrangement of their home as if he could see it, discussed the projected colour with her at great length.

She left him on the stoep, in a position where she would catch sight of him on her return at the

moment she reached the gate; but when her purchase was made, she did not hasten to rejoin him there. She turned, instead, up Adderley Street, and entered the Government Gardens. There was a big building on her right, near the foot of the avenue, and she went into it. The stone over the doorway was inscribed with the words "Public Library."

"Please," she said nervously to the gentleman who was standing behind the counter, "I want a criticism on a book of poems. It doesn't matter what poems they are, or who wrote them; but they must be fine poems, and the critic must say that the poet is a genius—a great genius—one of the greatest geniuses in the world! Can you help me?"

The librarian was a man who had strong views as to what everybody else should read. He displayed dryasdust volumes, designed to raise the taste of Cape Town, in a prominent glass-case, that unwary people might be lured into asking for them, and shuddered when he gave out a novel. A demand on him so vague as this, however, took him aback.

"What kind of poet?" he said. "There have been many fine poets. Do you mean one who is writing now?"

"I really don't mind at all," answered Polly, impartially, "so long as he is good."

"We have just received a work that might suit you, perhaps," he said. "How would this do?" He handed her "Victorian Poets" by Stedman. "If you go into the reading-room, you can glance through it at your leisure."

She clutched the fat green volume thankfully, and taking a chair at one of the tables where there were pens and ink, hurriedly skimmed the contents.

The names looked promising enough. Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne, a host met her eye, including dozens of whom she had never heard. Settling herself to the perusal, though, it seemed to her eagerness that the author perceived more faults than merits even in the best of them, and nowhere could she encounter exactly what she sought.

At length, after infinite pains, she culled a selection of appreciative paragraphs, and contrived to dovetail them into a fairly consistent whole; but a panegyric on Byron, that she observed too late to insert satisfactorily without omitting a eulogy of Keats, prevented her feeling the satisfaction with her performance to which it was entitled.

"I am very much obliged," she said, in restoring the book.

"Have you found what you wanted?" asked the librarian, curiously.

"Yes, thank you," she declared, "at least it will do for the present; but I shall have to come several times again."

She now proceeded to the station, and reached the garden just as it was reddened by the sunset. Willy was still where she had left him. She took off her outdoor things, and came out, and went to his side. She had a weekly London paper she had bought, in one hand—a Paper he had often referred to latterly with awe and anticipation—and behind her she held her sheet of foolscap. She gave him the paper.

"Sweetheart," she said, "I have brought you your first review!"

He fell to trembling, pale to the lips.

"What do they say?" he whispered. "What is it in?"

She mentioned the Paper's name. "Shall I read it to you?"

"Yes," he said reverently, "let me hear!"

She took a seat a few feet away, and read.

"'The minor poetry of the last few years,' she began, "is of a strangely composite order. We can see that the long-unpopular Browning at length has become a potent force as the pioneer of a half-dramatic, half-psychological method, whose adherents seek a change from the idyllic repose of Tennyson and his followers. With

this intent, and with a strong leaning towards the art studies and convictions of the Rossetti group, a Neo-Romantic School has arisen, in which Mr. William Childers, whose *Reveries* is now under our consideration, leaps at a bound into the foremost place. His songs resemble those of Rossetti in terseness and beauty, while with Browning they escape at times to that stronghold whither science and materialism are not prepared to follow. Art so complex as Mr. Childers' was not possible until centuries of literature had passed, and an artist could overlook the field, essay each style, and evolve a metrical result which should be to that of earlier periods what the music of Meyerbeer and Rossini is to the narrower range of Piccini or Gluck. All must acknowledge that *Sic Itur ad Astra* is perfect of its kind. Take this and that exquisite ode, *To a Memory*, or *My Soul and I!* We call them poetry; poetry of the lasting sort, and attractive to successive generations. We believe that they will be read when many years have passed away; that they will be picked out and treasured by future compilers.'"

She paused, that *he* might breathe. Heaven had fallen into the Rondebosch garden, and its glory was flooding him.

Presently she bent over her manuscript again, and read on for several minutes to the end.

When she had finished they did not speak, by any words. She leant her head upon his breast, while his soul uttered a thanksgiving upon the eminence to which her lie had raised him. He had touched the apex. He was tasting an intenser joy than comes to one man among millions—a joy so keen that few of us have the imagination to conceive it.

"Are you happy?"

"'Happy'!" His voice was broken, and he pressed his hands over his heart. "*You* and *Fame!* Can life have any more to yield!"

"It shall be so for you always—always!" she murmured. "Let us go in."

The brief Cape twilight was beginning to fall outside, and she lit the lamp. Viewed from the room, the garden was full of tender tints. She led him to a seat and kissed him.

"Your chair in Our Home!" she said. "Oh, and the shade! I had forgotten it."

"What colour did you choose after all, Rosa?"

"It is *couleur de rose!*" said Polly. And she put it on.

There was, twelve months later, living on the border of Mowbray and Rondebosch, a famous poet. He had never spoken with his publishers, but from time to time they wrote to him, in

terms of respectful admiration, and then the celebrated actress, who shared his exile, and acted as his amanuensis, read their letters to him, and subsequently cashed the small drafts that they apologetically enclosed. At the primitive shops from which the villa was supplied, the pair was known as "Mr. and Mrs. Childers," but as they had not been to the church, none of the neighbours called upon them, and since the poet, being blind, was always attended by the actress, he made no acquaintances in his walks. He had recently published his second work, which, if possible, had increased the reputation he had won by his first. The two volumes were the most treasured of his possessions, and from the shelf on which they were kept he often took them down and fondled them. To a stranger who parted the expensive covers, the contents might have appeared startling in the face of so much pride; indeed, he might have been pardoned the impression that he was looking at Mavor's Spelling Book and a child's History of England. But the poet handled them rapturously. To touch them was almost as thrilling as to embrace his plain companion, whom he always addressed by a name that was not hers, and whom, inexplicably, he believed to be so beautiful.

The Back of Bohemia.

I.

As two ladies came out of the florist's in the Rue Royale, and moved towards their carriage, the younger of the pair gave a start of surprise, and exclaimed—

"Ernest!"

"Who?" said Lady Liddington, vaguely. "What?"

Her niece was already shaking hands with him—a young man with a voluminous neck-tie and a soft felt hat, who looked poor and clever and Bohemian.

"Ernest," she cried, "how glad I am to see you!"

"Kate! Who would have thought of meeting you over here!" He gazed at her with astonishment and admiration. "I should hardly have recognized you."

"I've grown up! Let me introduce you to my aunt, Lady Liddington.—You've often heard of Ernest, Aunt Madge! I was his first critic. —And your mother and father?"

"Quite well, thanks."

"They are with you?"

"No, oh no; they are still in Coblentz. The governor grumbles to me regularly every month; the mater bears it better. Poor old governor! he was meant to lounge through life with a rose-bud in his buttonhole, wasn't he? I've been living in Paris nearly five years now."

"And working?"

"And working! I'm a painter of sorts at last."

"I can see you're a painter," laughed the girl, with a glance at the flowing bow. "Why 'of sorts'?"

"Art is a very arduous profession, I believe," murmured Lady Liddington, politely. She was mentally praying that no one who knew her would happen to pass while they were standing here. Really the young man cut a figure! "Do you exhibit?"

"Not yet. I only sell."

"Indeed? I always understood——"

"I am at the lowest of the practical stages, Lady Liddington. At present I sell—somehow! Later on I shall manage to exhibit, and be unable to sell. Finally I hope to exhibit and sell too. But the way is long."

"I see," she replied, profoundly uninterested.

"A real live artist!" said Miss Ormerod, gaily.

"How proud you must be! It seems only the other day you were a boy at home, dreaming dreams."

"Yes, I was good at dreams," he confessed; "dreams don't want anatomy. How well I remember it all! But I am keeping you."

"You must come and see us," she said, "and soon! I have a hundred questions to ask you. What are we doing to-morrow, Aunt Madge?"

"Er—to-morrow? There is the Elysée in the evening, you know, and the next night, I am afraid—— But if to-morrow afternoon——"

"I shall be very pleased," he declared. He repeated the address, and raised his distressing hat. The victoria drove away, and the two occupants mused a moment, Kate Ormerod smiling.

The first to speak was the chaperon whom nature had never intended for one.

"Your introduction was delicious," she said. "Who *is* the gentleman you have made me ask home?"

"Is it possible you don't know him?—Ernest!"

"Yes, I heard you call him 'Ernest.' I shouldn't do it again if I were you. Hasn't he a surname by any chance?"

"Not call him——? Oh, my dear aunt, how can you be so absurd! He is Ernest Mallock. Why, we were almost like brother and sister

until his people had to leave 'Moyamehane' and go abroad. My mother must have spoken of them to you a thousand times."

"Oh," said Lady Liddington, "he is Cyril Mallock's son, is he? But you are not in the wilds of County Roscommon now, remember; you are neither of you children any more, and——"

"And the Mallocks have lost all their money," concluded Miss Ormerod with warmth. "Don't leave that out, because it's really what you mean! Yes, they are ruined—and what of it? If you think it is any reason why I should pass a boy in the streets, who——"

"My dear," said the other, plaintively, "I did not suggest that you should pass *anybody* in the streets. You know I did not! I only hinted—— It is very unkind of you, Kate, to make such accusations."

The girl turned apologetically.

"Poor Aunt Madge! Yes, I was bolting, wasn't I? I'm sorry. But if you knew how happy it made me to see him—it was like a bit of my childhood crossing the road to me! It was Ernest who taught me to sit a horse and how to throw a fly. It was Ernest who taught me *not* to paint. He used to kiss me up to the time I was fifteen."

"My child!" gasped her aunt, looking appre-

hensively at the coachman's back. "Don't! So he is Lord Fernahoe's nephew, that young man in the remarkable costume? How painful! Of course he has no chance of the succession, not the slightest. Fernahoe has a son, and I've met him. He is twenty years of age, and quite offensively robust. Wins cups and things, and takes absurd dumb-bells in his portmanteau when he stays anywhere. Your friend can go on dressing like a disreputable glazier for ever, if that is the only prospect he can boast."

"I don't suppose he even thinks of it. His clothes seem to jar you like an Anarchist banner. He used to be rather a dandy, I can tell you, until the crash came. And Lord Fernahoe might have paid off the mortgage without feeling it—hateful man! But he quarrelled with the Mallocks years ago."

"Very strange, isn't it? Perhaps his brother did something disgraceful."

"Aunt! Why on earth should it be Mr. Mallock's fault?"

"Well, I'm sure I don't know, my dear," said Lady Liddington. "Only *one* of them must have been to blame, it is very certain, and it is always pleasanter to blame the people you don't meet; don't you think so? How sweet those roses smell, but what a monstrous price! I'm sorry we bought them."

Men said of Madge Liddington that she was "a good sort." Her worldliness was not disagreeable—not too real. Of herself she said that she knew what she ought to do, but somehow never did it. Her theories were more cynical than her heart, and on the morrow, when Ernest Mallock came, she was gracious and even cordial.

He had made some concessions to the occasion. His toilette, if shabby, was less unconventional to-day, and obviously he had no idea of falling in love with Kate. They chatted quite freely. There was too little formality between them for a chaperon to be wholly pleased, but, at the same time, too little to suggest the existence of sentiment on either side.

"Tell me all!" said Miss Ormerod. "Tell me frankly. Does it come up to your expectations? You're a painter, you're in Paris, you're in Bohemia: is it quite as lovely as you thought it was going to be? Does everybody talk 'Art,' and rave about the time when he will 'make a school,' and discuss his 'methods' over 'bocks' and cigarettes? What are you painting now—can we see your studio?"

"What am I to answer first?" he laughed.

"Don't answer anything—talk! Tell me what the life is like!"

"It's very much like what I looked for. Yes,

some of us do prose about our methods, I'm afraid, and we drink a great many bocks—when we've the money to pay for them—and *my* Paris isn't a bit like *your* Paris; it's a different world."

"It must be heavenly! If I had had any talent I should have loved to go in for it myself! And do you know any clever people besides artists? Authors and actors, I mean? Do you know any people with long hair? Frenchmen seem to go to one extreme or the other—they either wear their hair waving in the breeze, or they have it cut too short to part it, even. All the people who come here are the cropped and dull ones."

"Kate!"

"Well, they are, Aunt Madge. . . . Do you know Sardou, or Alphonse Daudet, or Sarah Bernhardt?'

He shook his head.

"I don't. I know one or two English correspondents. I did a piece of newspaper work myself not long ago."

"Really?"

"In collaboration, yes. Gladstone was expected in Paris, and my friend thought he'd like to send an 'Interview' with him to his paper. We wrote it together at one of the tables outside a café on the Boul' Miche' while Gladstone was still

travelling towards the Gare du Nord. We credited him with some very interesting views."

"Oh!"

"So that's journalism?"

"No, scarcely, Lady Liddington; it's a secret."

"And do you prefer living here to being in London," she inquired; "or couldn't you work so well at home, Mr. Mallock?"

"I've scarcely thought about it," he replied with a shrug; "this *is* my home now. Oh, I should say London would be ghastly—unless one were a Fitz John's Avenue gentleman, making a big income. For the smaller fry——"

"Too dreary?"

He shuddered. "What could one do with one's self? I've heard about it! One fellow I meet works for London from here—black-and-white work, you know. Oh, rather funny! Did you ever see a magazine called *The Lantern?* It's very 'earnest'—and only sixpence. Last month poor Tassie had to illustrate the line, 'He strolled meditatively through the summer night.' He made the man lighting a cigar. The other day he got his sketch back. The editor was politely sorry, 'But in *The Lantern* they didn't smoke.'"

He stayed an hour, and, under the circumstances, could one do less, when he rose, than fix an evening for his dining there? After he had

dined there, what more natural than that he should call?

Two afternoon visits, a dinner, and a strong friendship with one of his hostesses: the earlier intimacy was fairly renewed, and Lady Liddington resigned herself to the inevitable without further struggling.

They now saw him frequently. He sent them tickets for the clubs, and met them there to explain the pictures' merits; and if the elder woman, failing to understand why magenta cattle should graze on purple grass, sometimes sat down with a headache, and left Kate to wander round the rooms with him alone, was she a chaperon without defence?

No, they were not in love, but they were in danger. He had begun to look forward to these meetings, and so had the girl. He interested her; she was sympathetic to him. He had been right when he said that they belonged to different worlds; and that their lives were the antithesis of each other had itself a fascination, the deeper for the fact that they had once been almost the same. He knew his Bullier, his Clichy, the minor studios, and the cheaper cafés; he was not unfamiliar with the interior of the nearest Mont de Piété; but of the Paris unfolded to Lady Liddington's niece he knew very little. It was a novel experience to him to see a dinner-table

poetised by flowers and a Salviati service. It was even a strange thing to Ernest Mallock to be sitting in a room with two ladies, and listening to ladies' conversation.

If he told himself he was being a fool, in moments of candour as the weeks passed, it must be conceded that the temptation was a strong one; but it must also be acknowledged that he spoke the truth. He was already thinking much too often of Miss Ormerod for a man who could not hope to marry her, and yet he was continuing to see her because he was too weak to stay away.

Then he knew that he loved her. He ceased at length to excuse himself by saying he found her "companionable," "*simpatica*," that there was "nothing in it." He knew he loved her; that the world was peopled by men, women, and Kate Ormerod; that she stood on a plane by herself—different from every one.

Paris now—the Paris that was open to him—stank in his nostrils. When he could not be with her in the daytime, he worked doggedly, and badly, finding occupation a relief to his feverish impatience; but in the evening to paint was impossible, and it was in the evenings that he ate his heart out.

He had not the faintest right ever to own his feelings to her, and he was aware of it. If he

acted properly, he would declare he was leaving the city, and say good-bye, but he could not nerve himself to the necessary point.

And after all, he argued, since he confessed nothing, asked for nothing, why should he deny himself the only happiness he possessed? Yes, he was passionately in love with her—but, if he didn't say so, what harm did it do? It would end by making him infernally miserable? Well, that was his affair; he would be infernally miserable anyhow!

If the man was not disposed to do his duty, however, the time had arrived when Lady Liddington could not shirk hers. One morning, when he called with some tickets, and was shown into the drawing-room, she was in it alone, reading a Tauchnitz novel. Kate was practising, he was told, indeed he could hear the piano.

"I was going to send you a note," said Lady Liddington; "we are returning to London."

He stared at her blankly.

"It's a terrible bore. We intended remaining fully two months longer, but my letters this morning make it imperative."

"You go soon?"

"To-morrow. And I am such a wretched sailor. Pity me!"

Miss Ormerod had begun Chopin's Second Nocturne. Mallock followed a line of it intensely,

without realizing he was listening. He felt that he had turned pale, and that it was essential to say something if he did not wish to look remarkable, but his mind refused to yield a commonplace. Lady Liddington, who had avoided plain-speaking with her niece by means of the same pretext, was no longer confident that she had escaped its necessity altogether.

"I am sorry," he said, at length. He played with the book she had put down. "Is it good?" he asked desperately.

"It's a romance," she replied. "No, stereotyped! A romance always ends with a marriage."

"Isn't that realistic?" he said. "Marriage is always the end of romance."

"You are practical, Mr. Mallock."

"It is the last virtue I shall ever attain, I regret to say," he stammered, hot with the sudden fear that she might be imputing mercenary motives.

Their gaze met in a pause, and she answered him gently.

"Why regret it, after all?" she murmured. "To be practical is often distressing."

"This is au revoir, then?" He got up. "Shall I see Miss Ormerod?"

"I don't think she has been told you're here. I'll let her know."

"Pray don't trouble. I can wish her good-bye

as I pass the room. I hope you will have a smooth crossing."

He was not forbidden, and his face thanked her as he took up his hat.

Kate lifted her head as the handle turned.

"You!"

"So you are going away?" he said huskily.

"We go to-morrow," she averred, looking at the keys of the piano. Her voice was nervous.

"Your aunt just told me. I shan't see you again."

"Not before we leave, I suppose."

"I mayn't see you again at all. Perhaps you won't come back to Paris."

"Oh surely, some time."

"I shall miss you horribly," he declared. "I don't know what I shall do without you!"

"We have been very good friends." She stroked a note slowly with her finger. "It seems a long while."

"Good-bye!" said Mallock, jerkily. He put out his hand, and she rose, extending her own. His misery glowed in his eyes. In hers—but he dared not read them! He caught the hand to his lips, and kissed it, and went out. Lady Liddington heard the door close. The Nocturne, however, was not resumed.

II.

Well, his paradise was ended! He was more wretched than he had ever been before in his life. He walked away heavily, without a destination in his mind. Where he went was nothing to him. Outside the Grand Hotel he brushed against a gentleman hurrying from the courtyard, and with a muttered apology would have passed on. Both looked round. The gentleman was his father.

Almost with his ejaculation of astonishment, Mallock saw that he was dressed in mourning. The asphalte and the trees lurched. "Good God," he gasped, "my mother——?"

"Your mother was never better," exclaimed the other gaily, clapping him on the shoulder; "she sends her love, and a thousand messages! I only got in an hour ago; I was just taking a cab up to you. Let me look at you. Well, well, well! it is good to see you again, Ernest. You know the news, don't you?"

"News? No, what news?"

"'What news'! Is it possible? Prepare yourself." He chuckled. "Prepare yourself, my boy!"

"Governor, is it something good?"

"It is very shocking," returned his father,

suddenly struggling after an expression of great solemnity, "very lamentable! But—er—as it is years since we met them, of course—— My brother and his son are both dead, Ernest—drowned. There was a yacht accident. Poor Maurice! He had his faults, but—ah, poor Maurice! Let's go inside—you haven't had luncheon, have you? I'll tell you all about it."

The Bohemian listened, half stupefied.

"You are Lord Fernahoe," he said. "You are Lord Fernahoe now? And I——"

"You are the Honourable Ernest Mallock, yes! Better than your profession, eh? Not but what you might have your studio still, if you fancied it. A studio after your own heart! It would be rather chic! And all the prettiest women could come and have their portraits painted. Very good! Well, to think you didn't know it—you amaze me!"

"I haven't opened a paper for a week. But—but Miss Ormerod is here, with Lady Liddington. It's strange *they* haven't seen it."

"They have, you may be sure."

"I am quite positive they haven't an idea of it. Great heavens, Governor, what a difference for you!"

"Yes," said the peer, complacently, "it will be a change after Coblentz. I have borne my reverses, Ernest, I have never complained; but

my health is not what it was. I—I have not the physique for the life of a poor man." He spoke as if he had been condemned to be a dock-labourer. "How do you think I'm looking?"

"You are looking as well as ever—and as young."

"Nonsense, nonsense! Ha, ha! What will you drink? I think I should like a little champagne—my doctor advises champagne. You must order some clothes, Ernest, at once. You are—you are damned shabby. Go to a tailor to-day; don't forget it. What are you doing with yourself this evening?"

"Nothing," said Mallock, "at least——"

"Nothing that won't wait anyhow! You'll meet me, and we'll have a little dinner together at— Bignon's is gone, isn't it?"

"Oh yes."

"Where do you go, as a rule?"

"I?" he smiled grimly; "I'm afraid my haunts would hardly suit you."

"No, I suppose not. Well, all that is over! You've grown very handsome, Ernie; you remind me of myself when I was your age. I may say that now, eh—an old man? But you look dazed! It was a terrible affair—poor Maurice, poor Maurice!—but don't keep looking so dazed!"

"You've rather staggered me," said Mallock,

gulping his wine. "I—I—if you don't mind, I'll leave you now. Where shall we meet?"

"Call for me here," said Fernahoe, airily; "I drove here from the station. Say six o'clock. There are some things I've got to attend to: I have to be shaved, and— By the way, to-morrow I can let you have a substantial sum; in the meanwhile, here's something to go on with—I suppose it will be useful? Six o'clock, then, sharp! And don't forget the tailor. Ta, ta."

"Six o'clock," answered his son. "Thanks! I won't be late."

He watched Lord Fernahoe sign to a cabman, and instruct him to drive to a coiffeur. He stood stupidly on the curb there after the cab had rattled away. His eyes were wide, and his mouth set. After a minute he crossed the road, and turned down the Avenue de l'Opéra, still gazing before him with the fixed stare. Among the carriages of the Rue de Rivoli, he hesitated; he seemed in doubt. Then he shrugged his shoulders, and slouched on and on—away from fashion, over the Pont Neuf, on to the Quays, down to the Place St. Michel. On the Boulevard one or two threw him a greeting. He did not know it. His face was deathly white—now and again he smeared the moisture from it with a hand that shook. Threading his way through a maze of the dilapidated streets of the Latin

Quarter, he came to a narrow entrance beside a shop-window packed high with charcoal and wood. There was a flight of dirty stairs, and he mounted them slowly, and opened a door.

The apartment was bedroom and salon in one. The bed was in disorder; on the table the remainder of a ragout that had been hot two hours ago was stiffening in the gravy. A baby of twelvemonths, unkempt, uncared for, lay fretting upon two pillows on the floor, and a woman in a red flannel dressing-gown and list slippers was sitting in an armchair, beading a black-satin cape. She turned her untidy head at his approach, dropping a hair-pin as she moved.

"Oh, here you are!" said Ernest Mallock's wife.

He threw himself on the bed. "I'm here."

"Have you brought back any money?"

"Take what you want!"

"How's this?" she exclaimed with delight. "You're in luck, Ernest!"

"Yes," he groaned, "I'm devilish lucky!"

She stooped for the fallen hair-pin, and picked her teeth with it reflectively.

"You've never sold that old 'Solitude,' surely?" she asked.

"Oh, for God's sake be quiet!" he said, "I'm tired."

"Where have you been? Your dedgennay's got cold. Shall I hot it up for you?"

"No, never mind, Bessy, thanks."

"It won't take a minute."

"I don't want it."

"What's the matter with it?" she asked sullenly.

"There is nothing the matter with it," he declared in a strained voice, "nothing! But I breakfasted out."

"Oh, you breakfasted out? Who with? You've taken to breakfasting out a good deal of late, haven't you? You're all alike—a nice lot you are! Drink, and pay for whoever's there—one caffy after the other—I know it! Never a thought of your wives at home! I tell you, an artist has no business with a wife."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes, I do 'think so,'" she said, angrily imitating his inflection; "yes, I do 'think so,' Mr. Sneerer! And I tell you more: I don't believe there's one among the lot who wouldn't be ashamed to have his doings known. No, I don't—do you hear? I don't believe there's *one;* there!"

"Oh!" he said calmly.

"*I* saw you the other day in the Rue Scribe walking with two ladies. Great swells they were —to look at. You didn't see *me,* did you? but *I* saw *you!* Who were they, answer me that?"

"Hush!" he said. "You're making a fool of yourself."

"Oh, am I? That's very easy to say! And you didn't look at the young one as if you worshipped her, did you?"

"Be quiet," he said. "Now then, be quiet! I won't have you speak of her."

"Oh, what a fine gentleman! Not speak of her, eh? His wife mustn't so much as speak of her! Ha, ha, ha; we've come to a pretty pass!—Listen to your father, my Blessing!—And her figure is nothing to brag of either, for all she'd got such grand stays on! And her mouth's too wide, and her hair wants tone." (In case women might be rendered vain by men's admiration, God made other women.) "I haven't been in the studios for nothing; *I* could see her faults, if *you* didn't!"

He clasped his hands on his head, and lay motionless.

"I am tired," he repeated wearily; "if you have finished, I want to sleep."

But it was not true—he wanted to think; he wanted to curse himself and die. In memory he was re-living the night of his first meeting with her—an English girl in a singing cellar off the Boulevard St. Martin, lured to Paris by a bogus advertisement, and insulted, on the evening of his presence, by a French student. He

recalled the enthusiasm with which he had knocked the man down, and the general row there had been with the cry of "English chaps for'ard!" terminating by the girl and him standing bareheaded outside on the pavement at two o'clock in the morning. She wept and blessed him. He was a Sir Galahad of chivalry, and afforded the Quarter another example of "the English eccentricity." After reflection, he offered to send her home to London. She had been unhappy there—she wept again, and did not want to go. He found her employment as a model, and paid the rent of the room he took for her, out of his own pocket. She was pretty; was the end surprising? She thought she was in love with him—let him see as much—and he was in love with his own romance. Whom had he to study? And life with her would be remarkably "jolly!" It was a boy's infatuation for Bohemia, while Bohemia had only shown a smile. Its front had been dazzling—he married her. This was the back of it.

She had picked up her work again, and sat sewing irascibly; he regarded her under lowered lids. She was pretty still, but to him her face was more loathsome than a leper. He hated each line of it; her footstep, every time she moved; each little harmless habit that she had, made his nerves ache.

It was half-past four; this evening he would have to confess his marriage to his father. How could he do it? He must tell Bessy of the change that had come to her, and witness her rejoicing!

The hands of the tawdry French clock upon the mantelshelf crept on; if he meant to keep the appointment, he ought to go soon.

The satin cape was nearly finished. The flies were swarming about the sticky dish and settling on the meat. When the clock struck six, Ernest Mallock was still lying on the unmade bed—looking at his wife.

A Weak Imitation.

Tuesday.

CABIN or intermediate? It is the question I have debated since I decided to return. New York declines to support me; nobody in London is awaiting me. Capital, translated into English money, twenty-five pounds — cabin or intermediate?

The brilliant adventurer of fiction who always finds it wise to be extravagant would not vacillate an instant; I know it. I know how that successful extravagance of his always warms my heart and fascinates me, so that I follow his impecunious career in hansoms with far more interest than the struggles of the hero, who is economical, and goes by omnibus. I know how I have admired him, and agreed with him, and rather pined between the paragraphs for a chance to be brilliant and adventurous too; but somehow, now the opening is here, I don't seem made for the part. I seem to incline to

the hero's point of view which is narrow and commonplace. The opportunity is magnificent: twenty-five pounds, and no source of income when I land! Nothing could be finer! I see the Adventurer in the situation to a semi-colon. (A reference would be made at such a crisis to his "irreproachable linen" and "faultless clothes.") He argues lazily that the true economy is to travel first-class on account of the people to be met. He meditates that aboard ship one mixes with distinctly wealthier persons than one knows at home, and adds that for the creation of intimacy a week at sea is equal to a year ashore. Yes, the adventurer would go cabin, and, what is more, he would most certainly be playing a David-and-Jonathan duologue with a desirable passenger by the time of sighting Queenstown. On the whole I am tempted to back his choice. He is mercenary but acute, and I shall risk it. By surface-car to Bowling Green, and then to book a first-class passage by the *Germanic!*

Wednesday.

I have done it! If I did not invariably feel the same way on coming aboard, I should say there isn't a soul on the ship with whom I shall ever have a conversation. Aware by experience, however, that in the course of the afternoon several individualities will emerge from the crowd

—the last a feminine individuality that I shall be astonished I overlooked. Also aware by experience that she will be the very last person I shall contrive to know. Not that it matters this trip; I am here on business! She will attract me by a suggestion of disdain, an air of "*le hig lif*," and prove on acquaintance perfectly natural. I shall believe her oblivious to men's existence, and she will own later that she tried to guess my profession, or wondered if I meant to speak to her. Whereat I shall be flattered, and at the same time disenchanted a shade.

The familiar first feature of a voyage has occurred. Exchanged a few words with some man on deck, and re-encountered him in the smoking-room, where we resumed the chat. Told me he has been to New York on pleasure; must be mad! Has an elderly stock-broker sort of cut about him, but do not know what he is, as we were not confidential. Must admit that if he had been an American, instead of a compatriot, I should be in full possession of his biography — related with that superficial simplicity of Cousin Jonathan which is as charming as it is deceptive. Other compatriot sits opposite me at table. Travelling with "Charles, his friend," to whom he recited all the French of the bill of fare in patronising tones for the admiration of the neighbourhood. Later

pronounced "plover" phonetically, and "Charles, his friend," corrected him. Situation strained!

Passenger-lists crowned the serviettes, and, faithful to my model, I have been carefully through one. There is a lord among us! The model would have "scanned it keenly" over a brandy-and-soda, but at that point the copy fell short. To the height of brandy-and-soda I cannot soar. I am travelling first-class, and I have examined the passenger-list. To carry the imitation to the length of a wine bill is asking too much of a novice. May of course look mean at dinner without the conventional claret, but if I deny myself beer (which I want) and spend the money on Apollinaris (which makes me ill), perhaps I can convey the idea of abstinence from motives of hygiene. Am going around on the track of the lord!

Thursday.

Not found him! He might get me a Government appointment, and I can't discover which he is. Don't like to inquire—the "love of Tommy," and all that! I thought I had identified him once, but it was only a major. It is exasperating; twenty-four hours gone without result. And this boat makes a fast passage! Merely rich people are no use to me, but there are enough dollars on board—including the

reputed contract of a variety actress—to sink the ship. She (not the ship, the actress) has already established a little coterie of admirers; they form a rather noisy semi-circle which the other women (and the men who don't belong to it) eye with envious reprobation. Funny the curiosity a professional excites in the philistine. Spoke to her, and referred to it. She said: "Sakes, they stare at me as if I was a 'Freak!'" Think "freak" is good! I found the semi-circle very jolly, and enjoyed myself.

Have had another promenade with him of the stockbroker aspect. He was alone—he always is—and seemed encouraged when I told him it was a nice day. Found him "doing the mile" with melancholy determination, and bore him company.

She has appeared! She is younger than usual. Saw her as we registered two-thirds of our "constitutional." She wears a tailor-made jacket, and a sailor-hat with a wisp of veil attached, deliciously incongruous and feminine. Her eyes met mine absently, as if she did not know I was there. If anything stimulates me to get friendly with a pretty woman it is being looked at as if she didn't know I was there! I think the eyes are gray. She does not seem to have any companion with her, and gives one the idea of being unmarried. Have not learnt her name

yet, though; she was reading when we passed again, and the back of her chair was hidden. Mean to glance at the initials on it when she goes below. Wish I could break the ice, and inaugurate a series of talks with her, but it is a wish and not an intention: no time to spare for enjoyment! The bugle is tooting for luncheon; unless she is ill she will move. . . .

She was just rising as I reached her—they *are* gray! Left the book in her place—"Aurora Leigh"—and a glove; size, five-and-a-fraction, or I'm a Yankee. Her chair is marked "N.B." (Superfluous injunction!) She is "Miss Nellie Bret"—found it in the passenger list. If I did have the leisure now—— But it is out of the question!

Friday.

It was a moment of weakness—or rather an hour—but it happened! I was sitting near her, divided by one; and presently the "one" got up. I had a view of her from time to time across the novel I had borrowed from the library, in the pages of which the Adventurer figured again. I was searching for something to say when a bold old beggar stopped deliberately in front of her, and, presuming on his age, robbed me of my opportunity. I considered it exceedingly "pushing" of him, though I envied him the

coup. I caught fragments of a tale about himself, and the Prince of Wales, and India—especially himself; but he failed to entertain her, I was delighted to observe, for she was monosyllabic and inaudible. He lounged away after ten minutes, and our eyes met. I fancied hers had a half-amused protest in them. As well as I could manage it, my own gaze expressed comprehension.

"You were so unkind," I said diffidently, "that I am frightened to risk boring you myself!"

That was the way it began.

She laughed; and when she answered me her voice had that timbre of the unexpected in it which one always feels on hearing a woman one has admired speak for the first time.

She is an art student going to Europe to study. The insolent opulence does not claim her, I imagine. She alluded to the pecuniary prospects of the career, and complained that it was so long before a palette produced a purse. I owned to her I wrote—tried to write, hoped to write; said the pen was no mightier than the brush. What a bond there is between artists, particularly when one of the pair is a girl! We talked without restraint for an hour; I might even say "without cessation." She mentioned the class she is joining; she called it the "institootion." Nothing is perfect—the peach has a stone, and the nice

American woman declines the vowel "u"; but when she *is* nice, probably la belle Americaine gets as near perfection as a New Yorker chasing the dollars comes to perpetual motion. And that is about "as near as makes no difference." She has the geniality of her husband and brothers, with a refinement that is her own; the charm of her sex allied to the spontaneity of her nation. Miss Bret is eminently companionable, under other circumstances she would represent the interest of my trip. Even as it is, there may surely be moments? I can't monopolize the lord from breakfast-time to cheese-and-crackers; there is no reason why in intervals—— Yes, I am compromising, I feel it! Banish the sentiment! The remainder of the day shall be devoted to relentless investigation for the personage who is to slap me on the shoulder and say, "My boy, a sinecure, five hundred a year! Take it, and woo Melpomene in peace!"

Saturday.

Can only conclude he is suffering in his stateroom. How plebeian! In the meanwhile why not Miss Bret as well as another? Saving the "stockbroker" I am not particularly chummy with anybody else, and I distinctly prefer the lady. Throgmorton Street is getting unnecessarily

attached to me. That is the worst of a passenger who doesn't thaw to the multitude; when he does take a liking, he is apt to be importunate. He is all the time hanging on to me when I want to drift Miss Bret-ward.

They are getting up a concert for Monday night; Miss Bret is to sing. Been practising her accompaniments with her, and then strolled with her on deck, and then took her down again to look for tea. Asked the steward if any was "going." She thought it funny; seems they don't say that in America. She declared it would be better if I asked if any was "coming." So it would, but it never struck me before. We "refreshed" at a table tête-à-tête, and were witty about the other people in the saloon. She had a box of sweets, and offered me some,—called them "candies," of course. Am not sure the American language hasn't a certain piquancy. "Candies?" it sounds pretty, I think. Could not avoid noticing how nice she looked with a caramel in her mouth,—the provoking movement of the lips, don't you know. (By Jove, I have just written it! And she has been chaffing me about that British "don't you know" like anything!) Suppose there is nothing intrinsically beautiful in sucking a caramel, but some women are adorable whatever they do.

Very bad taste, the rowdyness of the actress-

group. We went to "do the mile" before dinner, and I disliked passing it very much. That kind of thing seems to me disrespectful to the other ladies on board. I suggested to Miss Bret that we should limit ourselves to the opposite side of the boat.

I had helped her on with her jacket, and found her the pin belonging to the sailor-hat. What a sense of intimacy there is in helping a laughing woman to put on her "things!" What a curb one has to keep on one's self not to say too much!

Don't think I shall turn in yet. It's a heavenly night: go up and smoke, and look at the stars!

Sunday.

Great Scot! the "stockbroker" is the lord! Was there ever such good fortune! Verily hath the Adventurer wisdom, and I, his disciple, am in luck. I learnt it from her after Service; she had thought I knew, and alluded to the fact quite casually. Astonishing thing that before a woman has been abroad twelve hours she knows everything about every one—from the domestic relations of the first officer to the history of an improvident person with thirteen children in the steerage.

Have not had any conversation with him since I made the discovery, because I could not leave

Miss Bret abruptly, but I design the afternoon for him in its entirety.

Hope I am not beginning to take too lively an interest in Miss Bret. Must confess to a feeling of restlessness which I am aware is premonitory of a cropper. Think on the whole it would be as well to give her a wider berth during the remainder of the voyage. To think is to do: wider berth resolved!

Conversation with the lord as determined; we sauntered about together some time. Not the entire afternoon—indeed it was only for twenty minutes—but after being with Miss Bret so much I felt it would look rude to neglect her utterly. It is obvious one must use tact in affairs like this, and edge away by degrees.

A migration to port was taking place when I joined her, it was warmer that side. I moved her chair round for her, and placed it behind a boat out of the way of the promenaders. Stayed with her rather longer than I intended; we had tea on deck. When the bugle sounded for dinner I carried her rug down to the door of her state-room. Our hands touched as I gave it to her; fancied hers wasn't withdrawn as quickly as it might have been. Know *mine* wasn't! Am convinced my resolution was well taken; the less I see of her in future the better. Will have just one turn in the moonlight with her this

evening, and to-morrow limit myself to a few passing words.

Monday.

Had forgotten to-day was fixed for the concert; it has, of course, been impossible to avoid her. We had to have a last rehearsal, and there were several things to be discussed. Most prejudicial to my chances, all this, upon my soul!—have scarcely said a word to my intended benefactor except "Good morning."

Don't go in for gushing about sunsets, as a general rule, but the one this afternoon was really glorious. We considered it the loveliest we had seen; we had been walking, and paused to look at it. The sea was like a lake, and everything was purple and orange in turn. Couldn't help reminding her we should not watch many more together, and she said "no" very thoughtfully; and there was silence. I asked if she would be sorry when we landed, and she answered "for some things she thought she should." I said women often fancied they regretted it very much when a voyage ended, but twenty-four hours on shore was sufficient to blot the remembrance out. She said she had no doubt that was so. The silence was longer this time.

She found she was growing chilly a moment later, and decided she would go below. It was

simply balmy, so I bowed a dignified assent, and refrained from expostulating. Suppose it was silly to have said that about women forgetting, but, after all, if she is offended it simplifies my position with regard to her. Didn't sit beside her at the concert, which was as slow an affair as I ever endured. She thanked me rather coldly at the conclusion of her song, and I said "It was a privilege!" with formal politeness. Ghastly dull thing, a passage, anyhow; wish to goodness it was over!

Tuesday.

Not spoken six words to her all day! Not spoken to any one; got nothing to say. Smoked an ounce of tobacco, and am going to turn in.

Wednesday.

She has been lodged unapproachably between two old dowagers since breakfast. A deliberate plan to repulse me! And to judge by her expression one would imagine it was her daily custom to sit there.

Great mind to stop and have it out with her in front of the whole row. Did hesitate when I lifted my cap, but she only inclined her head with a smile, and went on with her book. Perhaps one of the old crones has moved—go up and see! . . .

Not moved! Both in a state of fixity suggestive

of a ninety-nine years' lease. Miss Nellie Bret reading as placidly as ever. Hope she didn't see me lounge round.

Couldn't address her when she went to luncheon, I meant to—tried to, but I bungled, and she figuratively walked over me. Afterwards I saw her ensconced in that detestable place again, with an air of being settled for the rest of the afternoon. And we are to be landed early to-morrow! This is simply infernal. . . .

I was scribbling at one of the double desks in the writing-room, and, as I made a blot, I looked in her face! She had been writing a letter on the other side. We lifted our heads at the same moment, and our eyes met through the scallop in the top of the partition.

It was my chance at last, and I threw it away! Don't know what demon possessed me. I said, "I'm afraid I'm disturbing you," and moved to another chair. Think I must have been crazed! She will never forgive me, never; and in twenty-four hours we shall be flying across England in opposite directions.

The coast of Cork is getting clearer every minute. Everybody on deck, staring and chattering. The idiot who fancies his French accent, has lent her his field-glasses, and she is flirting with him outrageously. Will she ever be alone? —I only live to apologize to her!

Couldn't see my dinner for watching her across the saloon. She left the table early, and I bolted up after her in the middle of an entrée. Cannoned against the lord in the companion-way just as I was reaching her. He caught me by the arm and began to talk. It was maddening! Nellie was leaning over the taffrail; the air had freshened, and the lace thing round her neck was fluttering in the breeze. I flung his hand off, and left him affronted—

She is an angel of tenderness and patience! *Must try to find a ring in pearls or pink coral for a fiver.*

The Life they said she Ruined.

HAVE you ever known moments in which you have yearned, with an intensity that was almost pain, for an unmet woman's love? Moments when mother, brother, friend—all have been insufficient to ease the restless aching of your heart which cried in its sudden loneliness for sympathy and consolation? When, like a far-off, unattainable star, through the gloom of your unuttered thoughts, there still gleamed that ideal of a visionary being with a gentle voice and pitying eyes, who should comprehend, and soothe, and whisper "hope"—when in your solitude of mind and soul it seemed Heaven could bestow no sweeter blessing than a confidante like this? No; you have known no such folly? You have never, in fancy, talked with her, and listened to tender words which have no existence but in the secret daydreams of your own imagination? You have never, in a great gust of pictured gladness, defined your longings at this woman's

feet? My friend, you are a happy man; or, you are an animal!

My name is Christian Arbroath, and from the peace of this, my new-found home, where the mountains round us rise into an azure sky, and existence passes so tranquilly that the outside world is nothing but a feverish memory, I send forth the story of my life—a life they would tell you I have "thrown away." Yet it is less of myself I would speak therein than of Her; let it be with Her my narrative commences, far from the present place, one long-gone summer's day.

She knows that she is dying; she knows that she will die unmourned, unmissed. The consciousness is bitterer than the fiercest pangs of the hunger she has endured till it faded in the numbness of exhaustion, more terrible than her fears of the eternity towards which she is slowly drifting out. It is the Nemesis of her guilt that there will be no one to weep for her, no one to care; the parched lips quiver at her loneliness, and her eyes moisten. To the fallen woman dying on a wayside seat it seems that heaven nor hell could devise a ghastlier satire on the price at which she has purchased love in life than this utter isolation in her hour of death.

Her dress is of silk; once considered too rich

for outdoor wear, to-day white with dust that lurks between its greasy folds, and clings in patches to its ragged hem; there is dust upon her hair, dust upon the broken boots half-hanging from her blistered feet; and, trickling down one wounded heel the roads have cut, comes a little stream of blood to mingle with the dust upon the ground.

It is the Sabbath morning: the hedges are gay with the bloom of wild flowers and the twitter of birds; she feels herself more loathsome here in the hush of the suburb than in the London beyond; the immensity of sky frightens her; Respectability shrinks from her appalled; the church-bells cry to her of an outraged God.

"Charity!"

Degraded and unpitied she stands in the path of Religion, and craves the means to live and to atone.

"Charity!"

The people pass her by with decorous, averted gaze, and hymn-books in their hands.

"Charity!"

She sinks back upon the bench; the bells have ceased, and through the open door the voluntary peals out upon her ears.

Hazily, dreamily, the half-forgotten music recalls another scene. In fancy, the scent of lavender is blown again across her nostrils; in

memory she hears the lowing of the cattle driven homeward in the eventide. She sees a girl standing at a cottage porch, listening to the clutter of the chickens, and the rattle of the tea-things in the tiny room within. The girl is innocent and pure, and the woman shudders where she lies, for two years have rolled away as the chords swell softly on the solemn stillness of the air, and it is the ghost of her former self, this girl she sees.

It is she, who has for man to-day nothing but scorn and hatred, who is roaming through the meadows by a stranger's side, thinking him honest, believing him true; she, to whom "man" is now a synonym for all that is base and vile, who is blushing under her mother's gaze at this new-found wealth of love, and who, Heaven help her! is presently sobbing out a prayer for strength in the wakeful night, alone.

The organ is silent; the minister is reading; and one more wraith of her youth floats back to mock her from a buried past.

She sees two figures standing together in a country lane, under the harvest-moon; their shadows blend in the uncertain light, and the girl's face is hidden by her hands. He has pleaded long and passionately, with eager words and tender tones. His wife in all but name for a little while, and then his own as fast as church and ring can bind them!

He will marry her, he swears it! Will she refuse her trust to him who has given her his heart?

The same banality! The tale that drags its sequel through the gaslit streets, or writes "Finis" on the mound above a nameless grave.

That is what she sees while life is ebbing from her, and I, who pen these lines, in looking back thank God's full mercy I was in time to save her.

Was it the very strangeness of that meeting which lent her in my sight a charm? Was it because I found her dying almost at our gates—my mother's gates and mine—that from the first her presence in the house to which I bore her, scarcely conscious, filled a void I had not dared to hint? Who knows? There is a destiny in these things, perhaps, so surely do some rencontres seem pre-arranged by Fate.

Do you remember the commencement of what has been called the divinest spirit-love that Earth has seen: when Lamartine, then the young poet who had just entranced the world with his "Méditations," was journeying from Rome to Florence, and paused to visit the cascades of Terni? Abstractedly ascending the parapet formed by the rocks, he found, on gaining the height, a girl, ignorant of his approach, reclining against the trunk of a tree. The breeze played with her long golden curls, tears glistened on her lashes

her blue eyes were fixed in melancholy contemplation upon the rushing waters at her feet. It was Delphine Gay, the improvisatrice of France.

I was no poet, I was a doctor; and in Hester Aubrey I found no woman whose thoughts were familiar to me through the medium of books; but in those weeks during which she tarried with us, while we nursed her back to cheerfulness and health, and her gratitude gave place to interest, as it appeared to me, I experienced a new-born happiness, a supreme contentment, a sense of homeliness within the quaint old rooms which had never been so strong to me before—a homeliness which, in the inexplicable contradictions of nature, a stranger had been the one to bring. My mother loved her well, I know. Returning from my daily rounds, I always came upon them sewing or reading in each other's company, and, by-and-by I noticed that Hester's face would brighten at my coming, and her gray, sweet-serious eyes grow pensive when I left. Then, when the earliest roses bloomed again in the pale cheeks, she would have said "Good-bye," and gone out into the world once more, but my mother pressed her to remain yet a little longer, for we knew that Hester was without a friend.

We did not know the whole truth, however. Was it wonderful she shrank from acknowledging her shame in the simple household which bounded

all her chances of redemption? Can I marvel that the deserted mistress taught us to regard her as a widow—and it was as "Mrs. Aubrey" that I loved her so. "Loved her," yes! In the old Eastern fancy I had met my "other-half"—my dearer and my better self. I discovered I could converse with Hester more freely than I had ever spoken to living soul before; I found affinities too subtle to be explained. In the afternoons, when my mother slept, she and I would sit together under the trees on the lawn, sometimes in reverie, more often talking so earnestly that twilight fell upon us both as a surprise. And once, with her hand retained in mine, while the sinking sun touched her hair redly, I asked her, and she promised, to become my wife.

It was at this period that my mother became ill; I summoned the aid of one of my most eminent colleagues. Hester and I waited upon her day and night. If devotion could have saved her life, Hester would have saved it as assuredly as I. Skill and affection alike were powerless; my mother died.

The time which followed was very sad to me. In deference to the prejudices of the world, it was conceded that I was incapable of protecting the girl I was going to marry; that my roof was no longer a fitting shelter for the woman whose honour it would, in a few

months, be my sole prerogative to guard. Hester Aubrey was adrift once more, and I was utterly alone.

She herself suggested her occupation, and I, in my profession, was able the more easily to effect her wish.

As a sick-nurse (I am recording her own experiences now) she felt she was in some measure expiating the guilt of her unacknowledged past; in the exercise of her fresh duties she trusted to lose sight of the sin of its concealment.

All the sophistry that springs from wretchedness was battling with her inborn instincts of holiness and truth. She knew she was beloved, less with the senses than the soul; she knew that the marriage to which she had consented would be a prelude to the finest intercourse in nature, the companionship of two kindred minds; she felt that in this future which she held within her grasp she could give happiness and find it. Why should she falter, and blight, with the confession of her past, her own prospects and her lover's peace?

Struggle as she would, they forced themselves upon her, these meditations, in the pauses of her sad vocation. Once, watching the young mother who was her charge, as she lay between the soft silk curtains of the bed, she compared the lot of her wealthy patient with her own. The child-wife's head, with its wealth of golden hair,

lay back among the lace-trimmed pillows; her eyes, which had looked last in feeble ecstasy upon her new-born son, were closed. She dreamt, to judge by the smile that hovered in the faint rose-light of the lamp upon her lips—dreamt, perhaps, of the baby grown to manhood, impervious to the charms of other women, and never so pleased as by his mother's side. And the nurse, contemplating her through the mist of unshed tears, envied her wildly for the destiny that gave her portion, home, and child without taking from her one iota of her fame; loathed herself for the sudden bitterness of spirit the while, and, with a low sob of misery, hurried from the room.

When she entered it next, a man was sitting by the bedside, opposite her chair; she knew it must be the husband and father who was her employer. He lifted his eyes, full of a proud delight, and their gaze met.

"Hester!"

"Frank! O God!"

They stood looking at each other across his sleeping wife—the woman who was struggling to regain the footing she had lost, and the man by whom her fall was caused.

"Hester!" he repeated under his breath, "why have you come here?"

"I am her nurse," she answered slowly; "I did not know!" and then both were silent.

Between them—an embodiment of all that separated the present from the past—the girl he had married stirred slightly under the coverlet.

"I want to speak to you," he said at length; "let us go down!"

They passed together from the sick-chamber to the floor below; and she, in viewing the luxury of his surroundings, remembered where and how she had seen him last. The dismal lodging in a street off the Strand; her desperate supplication to him to keep his word, and marry her; the cowardly farewell; her own despair; the recollections of the ensuing year when, alone in the mighty city, she had toiled till she could no longer see to stitch; her illness among strangers; the news that her mother was dead; the unpaid bill; the insults and the want—all found expression in one curt phrase:

"What have you to say?"

Looking at her, he too was thinking of that last interview, and, despite his agitation, marvelled at the change.

"Hester, will you ever forgive me? You don't know how my action was forced on me against my will. Believe me, I was penniless, dependent on my father from the beginning. To have done what—what I had promised you to do would have meant beggary and starvation for us both!"

"So you left me to starve alone!"

"I sought you incessantly, but it was all useless. From the moment my position changed, and I became my own master, it was the dearest wish of my heart to make you such reparation as was possible. You had gone—disappeared; I could not trace you."

"Reparation!" she echoed. "What reparation? Was it to make me your wife you sought me—was it to keep your oath? You know that it was not; you know, as I know now, that from the first, you were as false in heart as the name you bore. You were a coward then; you are a coward now—for your emotion's fear, and not repentance. What is to prevent me going to that child you have married, and telling her everything, before I leave your house? Why should I hesitate? For any compassion *you* have shown to me—for any sentiment towards *her*? She is too young to have learned the world's lesson yet—do you think she would turn to you for consolation? When you were tired of me, you treated me as if I were without heart, or soul, or conscience. If your valuation was correct, I shall go to your wife, and make her hate you."

"Hester, have mercy; I love her!"

The words broke from him with a groan, and she pitied him.

"Ah, don't fear, I am not so vile as that. Try to keep her faith in you intact; don't kill it

as you killed mine—it is all I beg of you. Good-bye!"

"If money——"

"Money!" The momentary softness faded from her voice, and she faced him with her eyes ablaze. "I would not touch your money if I were without food again, if I were dying as you abandoned me to die; I once asked you for justice, but never for that! I am going to marry Christian Arbroath; save your money to buy toys for your son!"

"Dr. Arbroath is going to *marry* you?"

She shivered under the amazement of his glance, the incredulity of his tone. It was the supreme moment of her life; it was as though the scorn of the whole universe had been hurled at her by him who was its cause. "Dr. Arbroath is going to *marry* you?" In advance she heard the whispers with which the tidings would be received, the sneers that would be levelled at the man who had braved Society's opinions, if once her history were known. She saw his helpless shame, and heard the laughter of the world echoing in his ears. She saw herself as the world would see her, and him disgraced by the very love she bore him.

"Hester, is it true?" There was astonishment and relief in the question.

"No;" and in the answer each word came

slowly with a wrench, like one that ends a cherished hope: "It is a *lie;* I shall never be Christian Arbroath's wife!"

Before me, as I write, is the letter in which she confessed her past, and bade me farewell for ever. Other tears have blotted it than those which fell in the hour that saw it penned.

Before me, too, is the form which crowned my search, she to whom I pleaded; the "other half" whom God permitted me to join—Hester, my wife.

Sometimes, more rarely now as years roll on, a shadow, like a passing cloud rendering the sunlight brighter, dims the gladness of her gaze; and then I know she reproaches herself with days gone by, and the faithful heart mourns the career they said she ruined.

Ruined! Come closer to me, dearest; put your arms about my neck; let me look into your eyes! Ruined, do they say! So may my "ruin" cling to me through life; so may I, in the life beyond, where, judged at the foot of Love, all halves shall meet in the Eternal Unity, have thee beside me, purifying amidst purity—in spirit hold thee, endless throughout all time!

The Girl at Lake Lincoln.

A YOUNG Englishman was sitting in the hall of the Palmer House, Chicago, gnawing his moustache. He was a journalist, and a week ago no less a personage than the editor of the *Chanticleer* had offered to consider a series of articles from his pen if he could hit on a new idea. He had been cudgelling his brains ever since. "A new idea?" He must certainly find it—a new idea!

The hot hall was full, as usual, with the hotel visitors and those who, like Charlie Bartlett, were merely availing themselves of a free lounge. All the red velvet chairs were occupied, and the big black-and-white squares of the marble floor, dotted with vase-shaped, scarlet spittoons, rang with the footsteps of the people streaming to and fro between the doors. He watched the crowd musingly. He contemplated a pretty woman coming down the staircase, and the youth at the cable-counter, and the boy behind the bookstall. None of these objects of his scrutiny assisted his

meditations, though the pretty woman was less unprofitable than the rest. Then he wiped the perspiration from his face, and bought a newspaper.

Scanning the sheets, he saw an advertisement that suggested possibilities, and he read it through again. It ran thus :—

INTEMPERANCE.—Refined Home for a limited number of patients of both sexes suffering from stimulants, chloral, or the morphia-habit. Judicious supervision. Luxury and recreations. Highest references.—For prospectus and particulars, Dr. Ferguson, The Retreat, Lake Lincoln.

The life in such a place ought to furnish very good "copy" indeed. The "patients of both sexes" should make a peculiarly interesting study.

"I think," said Charlie Bartlett to himself, "I think I may cry 'Eureka.' The thing hasn't been done, and I'll drop a line to the worthy doctor this afternoon."

He wrote as "a victim to alcohol." He said that he wished to place himself under a firm, restraining influence. Fearing, however, that if he were at all bored, his recovery might be retarded, he would be glad to hear how many ladies and gentlemen were at present residing under Dr. Ferguson's roof.

The reply, which came by return of post, was satisfactory. The terms were very little higher than he had expected them to be, and the estab-

lishment contained twenty patients, of whom eight were ladies. Should he decide to avail himself of the care and attention offered, Dr. Ferguson would be pleased to learn when his arrival might be looked for. It was a plain, straightforward letter, and Charlie answered it immediately, announcing that he would present himself at "The Retreat" on the next day but one. He was now in quite a complacent frame of mind, and he felt that the editor of the *Chanticleer* would be very agreeably surprised by-and-by.

Lake Lincoln was a little over an hour's run from the city, and when the train deposited Bartlett at the platform, he found that "The Retreat" was well known. A porter pointed it out to him across a clump of trees. The investigator arranged that his portmanteau should be brought across without delay, and made his way to the house, whistling.

Dr. Ferguson welcomed him cordially.

"I am happy to see you, Mr. Bartlett," he said; "I guess you will not regret your step, sir. I guess, if you are in earnest, sir, we shall soon have overcome the propensity complained of."

"You are very good," responded Charlie, with something like a blush; "I hope you are right. I shall do my best to assist you, I promise."

Certain interrogatories followed, for which he was partially prepared. Among other things, he

was asked how long he had been a victim to the habit, and, remembering that his appearance did not resemble a confirmed drunkard's, he was careful to say that it was only for a short time. He passed the examination, he told himself afterwards, with honours. And then the doctor rang for the coloured servant to show him to the bedroom allotted to him, and warned him that he must not feel offended at his "baggage" being examined when it was delivered, in order that it might be seen whether any spirits were secreted in it.

"It's like the Customs," he said, "that's all. One of our necessary 'customs!'"

He made the same joke to everybody in the first interview. Some patients laughed, and some smiled wryly. Charlie laughed, and the doctor was pretty sure that nothing was being smuggled this time.

"I am allowed to smoke, I suppose?"

"Why, cert'nly," said Dr. Ferguson. "You are at liberty to do whatever you choose here, sir—all but the one thing, and don't you forget it. We take supper at six, Mr. Bartlett, and afterwards it is pleasant, summer evenings, in the grounds."

Charlie went up to his room, and made himself comfortable on the couch with a pipe and a novel. Presently a gong sounded, and he descended with curiosity.

It might have been a "spa" hotel, he decided, as he seated himself at the table, and the suggestion grew stronger as the meal proceeded. Everybody here appeared to find the same delight in dwelling on his symptoms. A man next him, sipping Apollinaris, turned and remarked, "No craving to-day—this is the third day without any craving, sir. Wonderful!" A woman opposite groaned audibly, and shook her head at her neighbour with a world of significance. "Low," she said, in a whisper, "mighty low! How are *you*, dear?" This patient, he subsequently learnt, was suffering from the deprivation of her chloral.

Gazing about him, his view was met by a girl who could scarcely have been more than five and twenty years of age. Her pale face was extremely interesting, and her beauty, in conjunction with her youth and the situation, made her a pathetic figure to behold. He wondered for what particular vice she was being treated, and if she would be cured. He hoped he would be introduced to her later.

The hope was fulfilled. They were made known to each other by Dr. Ferguson in the garden—"Mr. Bartlett, Miss Vancouver." She smiled graciously.

"How do you do?" she said. "I suppose you're already wishing you hadn't come?"

He refrained from the cheap compliment, and merely answered that it was not so.

"Why should I be?" he asked.

"The beginning is so bad for most of us," she said. "*I* cried the whole of the first night. But I am getting better now, am I not, doctor?"

"You are being a very good girl," averred the physician. "We shall send you back to your friends, one of these fine days."

The lady who had groaned at dinner came up to him with some complaint, and Bartlett and Miss Vancouver moved away together.

"May I," murmured Charlie, "if it isn't indiscreet—— But perhaps I oughn't to ask."

"What am I here for, do you mean?" she said, turning her big eyes on him frankly. "Oh, my trouble is morphia—I'm a morphomaniac; what's yours?"

"Er—drink," he said bashfully. "But I'm not a very bad case, you know; I've put myself under restraint early."

"Oh!" she said. She laid her hand on his arm as if by a sudden impulse. "Don't you crave?" she whispered. "Aren't you burning to be at it? Tell me all."

"I should enjoy a little whisky, certainly," he admitted. "And how about yourself? You are getting over the—er—weakness, you say?"

"I *said*," she replied, with a shrug; "that was

to *him.* Don't you believe it! I'm hopeless, that's what *I* am; nothing will ever cure me. He thinks I am getting on, and I'm quiet, and I deceive him; but when I'm out——"

"You will do it again?"

"Oh," she gasped, "I'd love it! I'd love it this minute—now. Haven't you ever tried it? It's beautiful! Don't let us talk about it. Talk about something else, quick! Tell me the fascination of whisky; I can't understand that."

So he explained to her, as well as he could, being a temperate young man, the fascination of getting intoxicated on whisky, and she listened with avidity. Then their conversation drifted into pleasanter channels, and he discovered that, her passion apart, she was a singularly bright and intellectual companion. They spoke of Howells' books, of the latest play at Hooley's Theatre—which she had seen, only having been in "The Retreat" a month. They discussed a variety of topics, from literature to lawn tennis, and said "Good night" at last, with the arrangement that they should make up a match on the following afternoon, a couple of decent courts being among the doctor's "recreations."

In one way and another, Bartlett found himself in Miss Vancouver's society a great deal during the next few days. Primarily, he thought it was because she was able to supply him with so much

material for the "series"—she was acquainted with the details of every inmate's case—but by degrees he was forced to own that it was because he liked her. Strange as it may sound—as it did sound to Bartlett—she attracted him, no longer as good "copy," but as a girl.

After their earliest parley, she had seldom mentioned her temptations, nor did she often question him now about his own, and, when these subjects were tabooed, he frequently forgot that she was a morphomaniac altogether, and chatted with her as gaily as if they were both visitors at the Palmer House or the Auditorium. It was only as his interest in her deepened that the painful fact constantly oppressed him, and then he came to the conclusion that she was occupying his thoughts much more than was desirable, and he determined to bring his investigations to a close.

He told her one morning that his stay was terminating.

"I have been here three weeks, and I have not tasted a drop of whisky the whole time," he said. "If I can do without it for three weeks, I can do without it always. Miss Vancouver, I am cured."

She gazed at him sadly.

"I hope so," she said; "but I never yet heard of so quick a cure. Have you spoken to the doctor?"

"I intend to do so," replied Charlie. "Anyhow, I have not been placed here—I can leave whenever I like."

They were in the garden as usual; Miss Vancouver was lying in a hammock. She had a white dress on, and her hair was ruffled by the cushion and the breeze. He thought he had never seen her look so charming, so subversive to his common sense. Her dark eyes were regretful, almost tender.

"*Shan't* I go?" he said.

"How — how can I advise?" said Miss Vancouver. "You must do what you think best."

"It is best that I should go," he declared.

He stood frowning at the grass, and, more than ever, he knew that it was true. He was in love with her. Revolting fact! Nothing more hideous could well have happened to him. In love with this girl! Yes, indeed, the sooner he went, the better for his peace of mind.

"Do you know that you have never told me your name?" he said huskily. "I should like to know your Christian name."

"It's Frankie."

"'Frankie Vancouver'—it's curious; somehow, it suits you. I shall go this afternoon, Miss Frankie Vancouver. Will you say good-bye to me now?"

Was it imagination, or did her lips tremble? was the white face whiter at his words? She put out her hand, and he took it, and held it for an instant tightly.

"Good-bye," she murmured.

"Good-bye," repeated Charlie Bartlett.

Neither spoke advice to the other, though each meant it. He knew, as he turned away across the lawn, that she understood he was fond of her, and she, as she lay watching his receding figure, knew that *she* cared for *him*. He thanked the doctor for all his kindness, and announced his intention of departing forthwith. But he did not see Miss Vancouver again; she was unwell at luncheon, and kept her room.

And, of course, it was one of those things that he ought to have ridiculed, and sneered at, and forgotten. Only he could not. It remained a horrible consciousness with him that the girl he loved was shut up in an establishment at Lake Lincoln for treatment for the morphia vice, and he used to have bad dreams, haunted by a frightful form that was Frankie and yet not Frankie—dreams from which he woke in a cold sweat.

Sometimes the picture of what she might become forced itself between him and his work, and the face of Frankie ten years hence glared up at him from the manuscript. Then he

shuddered and left his desk, and the article did not progress very rapidly the rest of that day.

He found it so difficult to concentrate his attention on what he was doing that it was a fortnight before No. 1 of the series was finished. After that, however, he fell into the swing of the thing, and went on apace. He had decided to submit the six papers—he meant to have six—all at once, and, when they were done, he rubbed his hands. They represented an editorial compliment and a very substantial cheque, he calculated. He was more cheerful than he had been since he quitted "The Retreat."

He was staying in a boarding-house in Indiana Street, and he was inclined to be careless in his habits. What was his dismay the following morning, on unfolding his copy of the *Chanticleer*, to see that he had been forestalled. He stamped and he swore. There it was, with terrific headlines, and a "leader" calling attention to it besides —"The Liquor and The Ladies! Life in a Dipsomaniac Home. By our Special Commissioner. To be continued Day-by-Day. Dainty Dames Demand Drink Desperately! Startling Stories of Some Sinners in Society."

Startling indeed! Why, what was this? Ah, it explained the strange "coincidence"—the matter was almost identical with his own! "Curse it!"

groaned Bartlett, recovering from his stupefaction; "somebody has got at my stuff; some leaping Yankee bounder has been prying about my room when I've been out! If I can find out who he is, I'll murder the thief!"

He caught up his hat and cane, and jumped on to the first cable-car that passed him. The editor of the *Chanticleer* was in, and, as it happened, accessible.

"I want to know who's doing your 'Dipsomaniac Home' series?" began Charlie. "I suppose it isn't a secret. Who is he?"

"Well," said the editor, "I guess it ain't your affair, but I don't mind telling you. The stuff was sent in by an 'outsider,' and I thought it a good idea. What do you ask for, anyhow?"

"What do I ask for?" echoed Charlie, excitedly; "look here—and here—and here!" He showered his manuscripts on the table as he spoke. "You told me to do you some articles on a new subject. I found the subject; I did the articles; and now this infernal outsider of yours has robbed me of my matter. I leave my desk open, and he has been at it."

The editor observed, parenthetically, that it was "smart business."

"Is it?" said Charlie. "There will be a deal smarter business when I get hold of him, I can tell you! I have suffered enough over

these investigations already, without having my information stolen from me at the end."

"Well," remarked the other, "all that don't concern *me*." He whistled through a tube, and presently announced that the "outsider" was Mr. George R. Wibrow, and the address given was a street on the North Side. Charlie drew a long breath and departed.

It was an awkward road to find, but he got to it at last. A German maidservant replied to his ring, and he inquired if Mr. Wibrow lived there, or if he only called for letters. As he was ushered into the parlour, he concluded that the gentleman did live there, though the maidservant's English was not the most intelligible.

He stood on the hearth-rug, put his hat on the table, and felt the suppleness of the cane. Then the door opened, and admitted Miss Frankie Vancouver!

Both started violently; both uttered the same monosyllable at the same moment—

"*You?*"

"But—but, how——" gasped Charlie.

"'George R. Wibrow' is my pen-name," she explained. "I am a journalist. That is why I was at 'The Retreat.' I only shammed the morphia—I had to be *something* terrible, or I couldn't have got in." She contemplated him

gravely. "I hope you are keeping sober?" she added.

"Sober!" he cried; "why, Heavens above! *I* am a journalist; *I* shammed the *whisky;* I too have written a series of papers, and that's the reason—— Oh, my dear, dear girl! to think you are a colleague, and not a morphomaniac at all! I expected to find a man, and had come to thrash him. Will you let me shake your dear little hand again, instead?"

And she did let him, and he kept on shaking it; and then, somehow or other, his arm was round her waist, and she was crying on his shoulder, and—and the rest was *banal.*

The Girl with the Greek Face.

I.

FEW social duties demand more patience and effrontery than the examination of your host's album in the presence of its owner. Indeed, as a general rule, I hold it safest to maintain a respectful silence until the first six pages have been leisurely dismissed, for experience teaches us it is at the commencement of these appalling books that the collector will be found to have assembled en masse the portraits of his relatives and loves.

But Arthur Deane was my best friend. And, then, a bachelor at least confronts you with fewer pitfalls than the Benedict. It is the connections by marriage which are most dangerous; the unrecognized sisters-in-law over whom you trip; the newly acquired maiden aunt, who lures you into candour and confusion. When Jonathan is single surely David may deem himself secure, premising only, as a preparatory safeguard, that he has a bowing acquaintance with the house of Saul? Besides, I was so anxious to learn who she was!

I asked him.

The entire narrative springs from my inquiry.

Judging by the photograph she might have been five and twenty years of age. The lips were delicate to sensitiveness; the chin, contradicting the mouth, betokened more than feminine strength of will; a profound melancholy could be read within the eyes. Involuntarily you cried, "What a perfect face!" at the second glance you said, "But not a happy woman."

In addition to its expression, the charm of the countenance was a peculiar one; an attraction which, baffling definition from the uneducated spectator, would still have riveted his interest by its singularity. Its characteristics were intensely Greek. No artifices of the toilet had been employed to heighten the effect; she might even have been unconscious of it; for, as every figure-painter becomes insensibly something of a physiognomist, I felt that amongst this girl's failings vanity had no place; it was too small.

To convey, however, the sensation produced upon me by the discovery of the likeness, it is necessary to make a momentary retrogression of eighteen months, and explain the circumstances under which I had encountered the original.

Imagine the interior of a pawnbroker's shop! If you cannot imagine it, so much the better for you; and if, being cognizant of my profession,

you find it disgusting that I should ever have been reduced to the strait of pledging my watch in order to subsist in this mighty nation, which Carlyle described as "thirty-eight millions—mostly fools!" let me remind you that an artist is dependent on the wise men. Only a fortnight since, my paper on Art students came back, 'declined with thanks,' and the following week the contents bill of the periodical to which it had been submitted was, "Do Carroty Men make Good Husbands?" 'Mostly fools,' and that editor caters for the majority.

Behold me, then, on an afternoon in March, 1882, nervously twirling my moustaches in one of these dépôts of impecuniosity, not, as the journalists say, a hundred miles distant from Leicester Square, when the door is pushed quietly back by a female hand, and a customer enters who requires fifteen shillings on a locket and chain!

I need a brush to paint the creature, not a pen! I saw a goddess, with the tips of her fingers protruding through a pair of mended gloves—a Venus in a shabby bodice and a shapeless skirt!

I abandoned myself to admiration. With my ticket lying unheeded on the counter, I simply sought some shallow pretext for remaining near her. At length, after hearing her pronounce the name, real or assumed, of Miss Alma West, I

withdrew, fearful of offending her by my scrutiny, and waited in the street till she came out.

Here, incensed at my own stupidity, I missed her in the crowd; and then, on the principle of Hogarth, who used to divide his thumb-nail by pencil-lines into four spaces, and transfer to it the four visages that in his walks abroad impressed him most, I, on reaching my lodging had attempted, a dozen sketches from memory of those features which, despite my subsequent attachment to the neighbourhood where I met her, I had never been so fortunate as to view, or to have recalled to me again, until this present occasion—datum, the nineteenth day of August, 1883—when, at Lauriston Vicarage, with his album held out towards him, in surprise, I exclaimed:

"Good heavens, Arthur! Who is this?" and pointed to my incognita's vignette.

"Which?" rejoined the Rev. Arthur Deane in a tone of abstraction from the window, absorbed in the restoration of an imprisoned butterfly to the flower-beds beyond; "whom do you mean?"

"Whom—which! The girl with the Greek face, to be sure!"

I had his attention now; he started as if he had been shot; paused, recovered himself, and then responded with a counter-question, and a curious one:

"Where does she live?" he cried.

"'Where,' my dear fellow! How should I know? I ask you who she is; I never spoke to her in my life!"

"I fancied you might tell me," he said painfully; "she is some one I—— You were away during that summer. Antwerp, was it not? Yes, of course; you were in Antwerp."

The man's struggle for composure was evident; he had grown as pale as death.

"I beg your pardon," I remarked hastily; "I did not mean to force a confidence—I had no idea——"

"That's it!" he interrupted with excitement. "You never thought—nobody thinks—— Over and over again since your return I have intended to tell you. I *will* tell you, only I must be calm; I will write it all by-and-by!"

"One moment, Arthur," I replied, by this time almost as disturbed as he; "the trap is at the gate, I shall just manage to catch my train to town. Write me what you please, withhold what you please, but before I go, here and now, who is she—what is she? Answer me that."

If I had inwardly wronged him by the vaguest doubt, I was the more unprepared for his reply; it came in two words:

"My wife!"

II.

[*Communicated by the Rev. Arthur Deane.*]

The communication I am about to make to you, my dear friend, is at once a humiliation and a relief. A relief, because I have longed for your consolation and advice, although I have lacked the courage to avow my trouble; a humiliation, since I must say to you: the man you esteem is unworthy your respect; the history of the pastor of Lauriston, a secret of which no one in his parish dreams.

I have owned to you I am married; it is a truth that has for three years been locked in my own breast—a fact unknown to all. Concealment is the extent of my transgression, but such a concealment! It makes my life a lie.

From my youth my inclinations pointed strongly towards the Church; on the other hand, my parents would have preferred me to study for the Bar. I have always entertained for my parents the most sincere affection, and would have gratified their wishes in this particular, even at the expense of my most precious hopes, but that my predilection for Orders was so marked, they decided opposition would be misplaced, and tenderly accorded their sanction to my plan.

I quitted college at the age of twenty-four, and

after a short delay was fortunate in being appointed to a curacy in the East End. Here began those practical labours I so ardently desired. I embraced with delight the manifold opportunities for occupation which abound nowhere so plentifully as in a poverty-ridden district such as this. My anticipations were fulfilled at last. At the end of five years, having gained the attention of my bishop by my sermons, I had the gratification of being installed as incumbent of a densely populated parish.

I received from Carlsbad, whither my father had at this period been ordered by his physician for a course of waters, a letter containing his warmest congratulations, and a postscript brimming with maternal pride. I was overjoyed.

During the ensuing summer, however, my health gave way under the constant strain to which, despite all warnings, I had foolishly subjected it, and which now compelled a temporary cessation from work. I thought of joining my parents on the Continent, but their movements were uncertain, and the journey was too long; of surprising you in Antwerp, but abandoned this second project for similar reasons. I determined in favour of the English coast, ultimately deciding upon Worthing.

One of the keenest pleasures of the seaside comes to you on the first morning, when you wake to hear the rolling of the waves. You

gaze from the window already invigorated; you descend to breakfast remembering it is a privilege to breathe.

I had not been long in these apartments when I discovered, by means of a conversation carried on outside my sitting-room door, that I was not the only invalid established there. Conversation, perhaps, is scarcely the term. I should rather say a monologue, for it was my landlady who uttered all the remarks that reached my ears.

I gathered from her observations, which were pitched in a somewhat higher key than good breeding deems essential, that a mother and daughter lodged above me on the third floor, and the elder woman, being unwell, had sent a petition for some tiny delicacy, which Mrs. Watson, on the grounds of an outstanding bill, was refusing to accord.

Could this hard voice I now heard belong to the person who presently smirked into my parlour, and hoped I should find with her all the comforts of a home? Oh, the power of prosperity!

In answer to my interrogatories she informed me that Mrs. and Miss West had been staying there a fortnight. She understood (her little ringlets shaking with humility) that they were from London, and extremely poor. What other particulars she might have afforded me I know not, for I did not seek to pry into their private affairs,

but to assist without wounding them, and I nipped her discourse in the bud. As a consequence of my mediation, the jelly was bought and conveyed to the sufferer, ostensibly by Mrs. Watson.

Thus my intervention continued to procure for her much which she had otherwise been denied, the increased stipend accruing from my rectorate permitting my more frequent indulgence in luxuries like this. Nevertheless, until the sixth day I had not so much as seen either of the ladies whom I served.

It was then that the imposition was detected, and I was honoured with a visit from the miserable girl who eventually became my wife.

I cannot describe to you, my friend, how beautiful she was, with a beauty one is accustomed to admire more often on the canvas than in the flesh, or how embarrassed I felt beneath this dignity of grief. My action no longer presented itself in the light of an ordinary civility, but as an insult I was unable to defend. She thanked me with tears in her eyes for the kindness I was showing to her sick mother, yet making it clear that it was a charity they must cease thenceforward to accept. I could only bow and acquiesce.

My condition, which had previously given promise of improvement, now suffered some slight relapse; exercise became a terrible fatigue, and the local practitioner in attendance upon the

patient upstairs, while assuring me there was no occasion for alarm, averred that my renewed weakness was the result of premature exertion, and insisted upon my absolute rest. I was confined to the house.

During this melancholy imprisonment, I received every evening a bunch of wild-flowers with Mrs. West's compliments. It was a graceful recognition, but as Mrs. West herself rarely issued from her room, I easily divined they were plucked by the daughter, who, at Dr. Cree's advice, habitually went out towards sunset for an hour's stroll. I grew to watch for these flowers; their arrival was a break in my solitude; it seemed less dismal when they came. On Tuesday the wonted knock was waited for in vain; I speedily knew why: Miss West had departed that afternoon for town. She returned extremely late the same night, and on Wednesday Mrs. Watson approached me with the stereotyped message of inquiry, and bearing the diurnal bouquet.

At the end of the week I was rapidly becoming convalescent, and I had an opportunity, on entering the crescent, after a short excursion, of more directly conveying my thanks for this mark of their solicitude. Miss West in a jacket and hat was on the steps.

"We should have been very ungrateful else,"

she said in response, "and we were neither of us that, though I was afraid you thought so."

"No, indeed," I answered lamely; "I only thought I had taken an unwarrantable liberty you would never forgive."

We stood looking down the crescent at the sea, in the silence that will occur between people newly introduced, even when they are intelligent enough to perceive its absurdity.

"You are an indefatigable nurse, Miss West; you must enjoy your brief recreation?"

"If I were less anxious about my mother," she replied, "I should like it more; I feel very selfish in leaving her."

"I trust she is recovering?"

"I hardly know; but she will have it that I require fresh air, and I cannot shake her belief in the necessity. Good-bye; I am glad to see you so much better!"

This exchange of conventionalities, vapid as it appears when transcribed in black and white, exhilarated me to a surprising extent; I retired to my room in higher spirits than I had been in for months.

It would be but dreary reading, I fear, were I to record the successive stages by which the acquaintanceship progressed; how from these casual rencontres, gradually protracted, I became, by-and-by, the companion of her walks.

It is enough to say that this hour was the oasis in the desert of my monotony; that, excepting my landlady, she was the only human being with whom I had the chance to talk. Not the faintest bashfulness of manner marred the frankness of her speech; for any coquetry or hesitation she evinced I might have been conversing with a man. Yet I caught myself continually recalling the latest interview, impatiently speculating about the next.

So my existence here gained an interest. The arrangement of my furniture ceased to oppress me by its precision; the waxwork fruit and the china-shepherdesses no longer struck me as grotesque. I now looked chiefly at the clock.

Not, however, till she announced to me her projected absence for a few days did I realize how great that interest was. Business called her mother to London, and it was impossible that she could travel alone; indeed, in her feeble state, the undertaking was fraught with considerable danger. I dreaded the result.

"I shall miss you very much, Miss West," I said.

"And I am sorry to go; besides, the expense is an inconvenience too!" she rejoined simply. She never disguised their position, even while she repudiated help. "Do you know, Mr. Deane, that until we came here I had never seen the sea, and now it seems such a bewildering,

wonderful thing to me, who view it for the first time. I dare say it sounds odd to own I have never built castles on the sands, and bought toy-buckets like everybody else, but all my years have been passed in Town, and my childhood was curiously unlike most. There is a sense of satisfaction in the knowledge that nearly all our luggage will be left behind to-morrow, and we should be sure to come back to fetch it, even if we did not return to stay; those trunks are a sort of connecting-link between the yellow beach and the 'two-pair-back' in a dirty little road where the milk-cans hang on the area-railings 'from noon to dewy eve,' and our neighbours repair their broken window-panes with brown-paper plaisters."

She had never till then referred, ever so vaguely, to anything beyond the immediate present, and I was flattered by these allusions to her mode of life, the one topic which must always be the sweetest to a man in converse with the woman he loves. Yes, loves; I knew it as I stood beside her on the deserted pierhead in the twilight—knew this woman was to me what none had ever been before, what none other could be on God's earth again.

"I told you I should miss you," I repeated; "I cannot say how much! To-morrow night I shall be here alone, thinking of you, trying to

picture you amongst surroundings where I have never seen you, and yet trying, because in imagination it will take me nearer to you!"

The breeze blowing fresh across the Channel had brought a flush to the pale cheek; her breast was heaving irregularly beneath her cape, with some repressed emotion her reminiscence had evoked. At my last words she started slightly, and I fancied she looked annoyed.

"I have not offended you? Tell me I am not quite indifferent to you—at least that I haven't presumed! It is only now that I understand what your society has been to me. Miss West—Alma, its loss would be more than I could bear!"

"You mean that you are in love with me," she said inquiringly, turning her eyes to mine, "and you have known me a month? How strange! Do men fall in love like that? Well, my friend—for you have been a very true friend to me—if I cared for you in the way you would have, or if I hated you, I might give you another answer; I do neither, and I will be candid! You admire me—it will do you no harm; you will be with me while I am here, you will talk to me, and you will continue to admire. Presently you will go away; in two or three months you will have forgotten I exist, and to console you whilst you still remember, be assured that of all the women in the world, you were about to propose to the

one who would have made you the worst wife."

Suddenly she came towards me. Her self-possession appeared to have deserted her; she was transfigured.

"Kiss me," she cried; "kiss me. You are fond of me—it will please you, and I shall feel less bad."

I took her in my arms. I covered with kisses her mouth, her brow, her hair, she yielding herself passively to my embrace.

"Now let us go in," she said; "it begins to get cold."

Five days passed without bringing me tidings of the absentees. On the sixth, Mrs. Watson and I each received a hasty note from Alma, to the effect that Mrs. West was utterly prostrated, and it was still difficult to conjecture how soon they would be able to start.

They had been gone almost a fortnight when Selina, the maid-of-all-work, in opening the door to me, informed me that Miss West had just arrived.

"And Mrs. West?" I said.

There was no need to ask. I knew it directly the question was framed; Alma, attired in the deepest mourning, her eyelids red with weeping, stood before me in the narrow passage. Her mother was dead.

"Please don't speak of it," she whispered piteously; "please don't! I can't bear that yet."

For forty-eight hours she kept her room, and when I saw her again, she had come to say good-bye. The thought of parting from her, perhaps for ever, was physical pain. A great knot gathered in my throat. I was ashamed of my own emotion; it seemed childish to show her that I suffered so. I implored her to remain. I entreated her to become my wife.

It was then this girl made me the following remarkable reply:

"Homeless, penniless, defenceless," she said; "don't tempt me!"

"If it is a temptation, why do you resist it?"

She looked at me wistfully.

"There might be so many reasons, might there not?" she murmured. "Well, I will give you one—because I do not love you!"

"You do not love me!" I said; "and yet——"

"And yet I asked you to kiss me, you mean! My friend, that was impulse, not passion; you looked so miserable, and I felt so guilty in comparison. No, do not misunderstand me; don't judge me too harshly. You need not blush for the recollection; since I lost my father you are the only man whose lips have ever touched my face. There, very few girls could have told you

so much as that; but still I am not worthy, and you would regret."

"Think!" I exclaimed—"think what it is that awaits you. The misery, the poverty! You have just painted that future in three words. Alma, consider."

"You press me hard," she said.

"I offer you a home, rest, love!" I continued passionately. "You say I shall regret; you misjudge yourself and me! I have passed the period when a man, in the egotism of youth, pictures a feminine reproduction of his own character, and christens it his ideal. I do not expect to find a woman whose mind will be the mirror of my own, whose remarks will be the echoes of my opinions; I don't *want* to find her! I want one whom I admire for her individuality, her beauty, and her purity; Alma, you are that woman, and I love you. Pity me, my darling, and say 'yes'!"

She had paused, her arm behind her, swaying upon the handle of the door.

"Very well," she said mechanically; "I consent!"

We were married.

And it is here I discover how impotent, how weak my writing is. I have not at my command one single sentence towards portraying to you the tranquillity, the supreme contentment of this time.

I had been her husband a week when a letter reached me from my parents, saying they would be in England (D.V.) that very afternoon. They were as yet ignorant of my marriage, since I had desired to acquaint them with the fact by word of mouth, and I determined to wait upon them in Clapham immediately on their arrival, and go back to Worthing the following night. Alma, who had been restless and unlike herself since morning, was delighted.

"Go," she said excitedly. "Go! Let us have no more concealment after to-day."

I kissed her and departed, reaching The Myrtles at five o'clock, only to meet with a disappointment, for after I had waited three hours a telegram was delivered to the housekeeper, stating that the return had been unavoidably postponed.

I was in doubt whether I should remain in London, as I had intended, or take the next train back to Alma. While I sauntered, undecided, along the Kennington Road, I was brought suddenly to a standstill by a startling sight.

At a corner of the gaslit street, hurrying through the crowd, with a white, set face, I saw my wife. She passed without observing me, and I followed her covertly, oppressed by an indefinable fear. Presently she stopped before a

rambling, old-fashioned building, which she entered. A moment afterwards I, also, was inside.

A narrow room, illuminated by two suspended lamps; an attendance of perhaps thirty persons, from infants wailing in their mothers' arms to men and women already on the brink of the grave. All eyes turned expectantly towards a platform at the end, separated from the auditorium by a dingy crimson rope, and communicating by a door with some other room. I could not have told you what I dreaded, but I no longer seemed to breathe. There was a murmur of expectation; the door slowly opened, and Alma confronted us all.

I understand I was carried into the air unconscious—I who had pulled stroke in the 'Varsity boat, for before she had spoken five minutes I had learnt three things:

1. That she had been known to these people for the past six years;

2. That she was giving her farewell discourse;

3. That my wife was an Atheist lecturer.

The cry I could not stifle attracted her attention; the words died on her lips; she gave a low moan, and I knew no more. When I sought her, she was gone. No line from her came to me, nor, despite my efforts, have I ever succeeded in tracing her, from that night down to the present time. If she yet pursues this awful calling, if she

has found the true Light, if she is dead—nothing is known to me! This is my confession, avowed to you in full. Take it, the manuscript is yours; should you choose to make it public, now or hereafter, you have my sanction, for the silence has worn me out, and I can no longer distinguish between right and wrong. My secret is in your hands, my friend; do with it what seems the best!

III.

[*Leaves from the Diary of Alma West.*]

September 3rd, 1884.

It is the anniversary of my wedding-day. Shall I never be permitted to forget it? Will that eternal self-reproach haunt me to the end? How good he was—how true, although I did not care for him! Yes, this book reminds me of it; I cannot shirk the truth. I married him for the peace he offered, like the coward that I was, and believed I could bury my past in his home. What a wretch! I deserved to be found out! And now—now, if I could only lay my head on his shoulder, and say, "Forgive me; I am so ill, and I love you!" I should be happy.

Oh, am I going to die, alone like this? I can't write; I am crying.

September 5th.

I have given up the needlework. I cannot see to stitch. The doctor will not come again; I cannot pay him.

Oh, my mother, my father, where are you? Nobody is near me. Arthur, my darling, I am starving. Why are you not here?

September 6th.

I shall write till I cannot guide a pen, for my last words will be left addressed to *him*. The thought has given me strength; it is as if I were talking to him again. Does he remember me, who loved me so well then? Shall I meet him when, where—— Oh, why was I born!

September 14th.

I have been worse; these lines are traced in bed. Not a human being has been to see me. I am in this garret by myself. I have pinned a paper to the wall, begging that my diary may be sent to Arthur. They will do it when they find my corpse. . . .

I have been dreaming, and Arthur has been kissing me. . . . The room is so dark and cold. I suffer; I am frightened.

September 17th.

I can no longer drag myself across the floor. Arthur, come to me; I am dying. Where am

I going? I am afraid to think! Why are you not here to pray for me? Arthur—husband, hold me back! Everything is slipping from me. Hold me back . . . pray for me, forgive me, pity me! Oh, my God—my God——

With Intent to Defraud.

He wished he were dead. It was not a "phrase," a verbal extravagance; he wished it. The only time he was free from anxiety was when he was asleep. His days were filled with worries and disappointments, and the ceaseless effort to make civil words do the duty of money; and it often occurred to George Collier, when he lay his head on the pillow, that if no to-morrow morning came to disturb him, it would be a very restful state of things.

He was a literary man. When he married Eva Kingston he thought he had "arrived." He was nine and twenty, and had already won his spurs. His reviews were splendid; he was called "powerful," "unconventional," "scholarly," "fine;" the press-cuttings his publishers sent him made his heart glow. But, unfortunately, the book did not sell, and he was unable to command any higher price for his next one.

It seemed an anomalous condition of affairs.

His work commended itself to the most exacting critics, and yet did not please the public. Of course he hoped, and Eva was sympathetic, and he went on writing patiently. But by degrees he saw that his confidence had been premature; and then he saw that his marriage had been premature; and then a child was born, and he gave up his ideals, and sank to pot-boiling, and the pot-boiling did not make the pot boil very violently either.

A baby added to his embarrassments a good deal. The long clothes seemed no sooner bought than it needed short clothes, and he had hardly recovered from the cost of these than it had grown out of them. The nurse appeared to lie awake all night thinking what she could ask for next, and she was a superior person, with imagination.

To-day there were school fees to be paid, and Eva was no longer sympathetic, and their address was Pandora Road, Balham. The little house to the right was called "Fotheringay," and the one to the left rejoiced in the name of "St. Olaph's," and when they moved in, Collier, in a fit of moroseness, had labelled their own abode "Box Cottage," and incurred the animosity of the street for ever.

Yes, Eva's sympathy had worn out, like the cheap drawing-room carpet, that had been so pretty when it was new. Benighted Balham and

the tedium of Tooting had got on her nerves, perhaps, or George, the failure, was a different man from the brilliant novelist with whom she had pictured herself receiving the notabilities of art and literature at musical "At Homes," where she would be attired in Liberty frocks. Anyhow, when he reflected that there had been a time when he wrote poetry about her, he turned hot.

She was a pale, slight woman, with gray eyes and fluffy hair, and a red flannel dressing-gown in the morning. After lunch, when she made her toilette, the gray eyes acquired a depth and soulfulness which was due to black cosmétique, and nobody would have suspected the tart and vulgar reproaches that could fall from her lips. Had she been what she looked, he sometimes thought, contemplating her wonderingly when an acquaintance was present, his courage would not have deserted him so soon. But, if he had confessed she weighed on him, the acquaintance would have considered him an unappreciative brute; she looked too wistful, and delicate, and fragile, to weigh on any one.

He was forty years of age, and soberly and deliberately he wished he were dead. Only one thing deterred him from making away with himself in a painless fashion, and that was the knowledge that he would leave her and the "chick" unprovided for.

This was his frame of mind when he came to project what can only be described as a fraud. He saw his way to dying comfortably, and still taking care that the "chick" and Eva did not want. That is to say, he would have seen his way if he could have raised the money necessary to pay the premium. He proposed to assure his life, and then commit suicide.

The curious part of it was that he had always been a singularly scrupulous man, and "as honest as the day"—that oft-quoted day which nobody remembers. People had often asserted he was "too conscientious to get on." He had never wronged any one by so much as sixpence in all his straits, and could have stood in a witness-box to be cross-examined without a tremor. His record was blameless, and his integrity notorious. Yet now he was meditating robbery on an extensive scale, and barely perceiving his defection.

A man he knew very well, and who frequently dropped in of an evening, was Mr. Horace Orkney, a solicitor. George was not sensible of any strong degree of esteem for him, but—perhaps for that very reason—Orkney looked the likeliest person for what he wanted, and one afternoon he betook himself to the gentleman's office.

"I have," he said, when greetings had been exchanged, "come on rather delicate business.

I needn't tell you that what I am going to say is in confidence."

"Quite so," said Orkney, drawing out the ends of his moustache.

"The fact is, things aren't going well with me. I am deadly tired of it all, and er—it sounds a curious statement—I am anxious to make away with myself."

The lawyer was only thirty-six, and he started. Professional calm reasserted itself a moment later, however, and he echoed George's last words in measured tones:

"To make away with yourself? Oh, nonsense!"

"I *am*," repeated Collier; "but my life isn't assured. You see the difficulty. I am bound to think of my wife and child, and they would be practically penniless."

"Assure it," suggested Mr. Horace Orkney with a shrug, "if you are determined! But, my dear Collier, do let me dissuade you from entertaining such a—such a—— Really, you know!" He withdrew his monogrammed handkerchief, and shook it out daintily, diffusing an agreeable odour of white rose. "You distress me very much."

"I won't trouble you with my arguments," responded Collier; "I haven't time to discuss the pros and cons, or to waste your time. My

mind is made up, and I know my own mind better than anybody else can tell it to me. You say, 'assure it;' the point is that I'm unable to do so, because I can't put my hands on the money."

"Oh," said Orkney. "The premiums aren't heavy," he added after a pause. "How much did you think of assuring for?"

"While I am about it I want to make an adequate provision; I want to arrange so that there shall be an income of, say, four or five hundred per annum. I know what the premium would be on an amount to yield that from a safe investment, and I should pay it for a year down! —it would be better. I reckon it three hundred and twenty pounds. Now, my idea was——"

"Was—what?" asked the solicitor, blandly, as he hesitated.

George was a little nervous. His gaze wandered.

"My idea was that you might be willing to advance me the sum, to be repayable with interest at my death. I—I am eager to make the proposal as attractive as I can. Advance me three hundred and twenty ponnds, and I'll have a will drawn up at once, and leave you a thousand. How does it strike you? I think myself it's very fair."

Horace Orkney tapped his fingers together pensively.

"A company contests the claim in a case of suspected suicide," he said; "you are overlooking that."

"I am overlooking nothing. I have thought it all out, and I know exactly what I shall do. A cousin of my wife's has a cottage in Kent, on the Darenth. We have often stayed there. The lawn slopes to the river's edge, and there is an Indian canoe. No more solitary place, especially after dusk, could exist. Now, I can easily contrive so that we get an invitation to go down for a week. One evening, after working hard all day, I shall say I am going out for a breath of fresh air. I shall ask what time they are going to have supper, and set my watch by their clock, so that I may not be late back. I shall beg my wife to remind me of an important letter I have to write in the morning, and step out through the window in the gayest of spirits. Well, the canoe upsets. It is known I do not swim. Nothing could be simpler!"

"But your intentions may alter, my friend. And, if they do, I have advanced you three hundred and twenty pounds, and where am *I?* In the natural course of events you may live for thirty or forty years to come."

"I thought," said Collier, "of waiting to put an end to my life till the spring, so as to avert any possibility of a suspicious complexion. If you

think it judicious, the 'accident' shall occur next month!"

There was another silence.

"I will consider," said Mr. Orkney, at length. "Now you must let me send you away; I'm busy."

Having considered, he agreed. He provided George Collier with the sum of three hundred and twenty pounds to take out a policy, and George made a will by which Mr. Horace Orkney was bequeathed one thousand. The rest went to Eva, who, to give her her due, was an affectionate mother.

The weary man was now comparatively contented. In April he was to die, and it was already November. To make quite certain there should be no hitch in the *post-mortem* proceedings, it had been decided that he should wait till April. He had had hopes that Orkney would declare it was safe for him to take the step earlier, but on reflection the lawyer had pronounced it inadvisable, and said it would be wiser for him to keep to the date he had originally suggested.

It was a disappointment, but George was too grateful to complain of a crumpled rose-leaf. He had borne the slings and arrows so hopelessly that it was a pity if he could not contemplate their continuance for five more months! No, he was not unreasonable, and, as first one week

wore away, and then another, his satisfaction increased. He felt like an overworked man looking forward to a long holiday.

There was a serious epidemic of influenza in London that year. Everybody who could afford to do so was flying to the Continent, or to the English watering-places, and among those who remained in Town, and were laid low, was Mrs. Collier. This was at Christmas.

The doctor did not at the beginning regard her case gravely, but she got worse, despite his encouragement, and after a fortnight in bed, she sank and died.

George was inexpressibly shocked. Though he had long since outlived his illusions about her, she had been his wife, his daily companion. To realize that she was gone dismayed him. He remembered the girl he had loved, and shed tears at the grave of the woman who had developed from her. Not analyzing, not drawing the distinction, but just grieving honestly.

After she was buried, and he sat in the quiet parlour, smoking at night, it occurred to him that as the child would now be doubly an orphan, he must arrange where she was to live when April came. Under the circumstances she would be an heiress, and he wanted her correspondingly educated. Fortunately, he had a maiden sister, upon whom he could depend to carry out his

wishes in this respect, and he drew a breath of relief, reflecting how troubled he would have been for the "chick's" future otherwise.

And January came to an end, and February broke, and then February waned, and it was March.

Collier was surprised to find how rapidly the time had passed since the funeral. He put "March 1st" at the top of a letter very slowly, and sat looking at it with startled eyes. A month more, and the consummation would be reached. Poor little "Chick," he would have to leave her!

Oddly, now the end of it all was so near, he was conscious of feeling less impatience than he had done. He had been sensible of late of a certain enjoyment in life—a new enjoyment. The quiet parlour, with his pipe, and the *Chronicle* had been *pleasant*. He had gone up to his room at night without a groan, and seated himself at his desk in the morning with an unfamiliar zest. Only a month! Well, let him make the most of it.

But it was difficult. The remembrance that had been so welcome had become, now he was a widower, a skeleton's head, which obtruded its grisly presence into the cosiest hours. Perhaps "Chick" was on his knee, and he was stroking her hair, when it grinned at him. Perhaps

he was writing through the small hours—interested in a piece of work he was doing—and it appeared. Of what use to have "Chick" fond of him, when he would be dead directly? Why polish and revise a manuscript so lovingly, when he would be lying in his grave before it was in print?

He shuddered. There was no benefit in blinking the truth; the fact was that the conditions had altered! He would have been a cheerful man to-day, for all his pecuniary worries, if he had been allowed; nor did the worries themselves look so formidable, somehow! Eva had always made the worst of everything, and—Heaven forgive him!—had never been a manager. It was amazing what a difference her removal caused in every way. He was satisfied with life and—he knew he did not want to die!

At last he determined to go to Orkney, and ask him to release him from his undertaking. It was an unpleasant task, but the alternative was more distasteful still, and he went.

Mr. Orkney looked at him in blank disapproval when he had stammered to a conclusion.

"This is very unbusiness-like," he said, "very unbusiness-like indeed! You put me in a very awkward situation, Collier. I don't want to see you die, of course—I—I hope I have a heart—but an agreement is an agreement, and I have

great occasion for a thousand pounds. As it happens, I have a bill——"

"You see," said Collier, helplessly, "there's the child! I don't like to leave her alone in the world."

"I thought you told me at the time of your wife's death that she could go to an aunt in Dorking?"

"Yes," George said, "I did. But—well, I am very fond of her. The parting is devilish hard."

"I don't see why it should be any harder this morning than when you came here and made your proposal. I did a friendly thing for you, and I must say this isn't at all fair treatment. It wasn't an agreement I could enforce, you know—I relied on your honour; and now you put me off with empty excuses."

"Don't say that!" begged George. "To tell you the honest truth—I don't know how it is—since I lost my wife I—I am not so depressed. I feel lighter, and there's a different aspect to things. I can't explain it."

"No," said Orkney, firmly, "I won't hear it! I won't have the blame laid at the door of that poor little woman. That is cowardly, Collier! Be a man, and say you have changed your mind, and are trying to back out."

"Very well, then," replied Collier, "I have changed my mind. I want to live, and to pay

you the thousand pounds as soon as I can get it together. How does it suit you?"

The solicitor smiled finely.

"It was a very fair rate of interest for the time agreed upon," he said; "but for a period of years— Anyhow, we needn't discuss the point. So far as I understand your position, there would be very little prospect of your being able to pay me at all—even the principal."

"In other words," said Collier, rising, "you won't consent?"

"I regret," said Orkney—"I regret very much that you should have put such a suggestion forward, because I am *unable* to consent to it, and it is a particularly painful one to refuse. I do not think it was delicate, Collier; it wasn't good taste."

"'Good taste,'" said George, hotly, "be damned! Finally, you insist on your pound of flesh?"

"Finally," responded the lawyer, "I repeat that if you are a man of honour only one course can be adopted. Good day, sir."

He touched the bell on his table, and Collier passed out into the street.

It was April already, and he had either to break his undertaking or fulfil it without delay. Instinctively he saw the grim humour of the situation. It was material for a story; and he

perceived that, if he were writing it, there would be a temptation to comment on the budding trees, and the "verdure of the young grass," at such a crisis, in contrast to the hero's despair. Or perhaps it would go better as a comic story? Yes, certainly it would, he decided. How queer! in reality there was so little comic in it. Why could it not be treated realistically?

What was he wasting his time for in irrelevant considerations—he had to come to a conclusion! He must die, or tell Orkney he was resolved to "let him in." Which should it be? Both courses repelled him. One was hideous, and the other was contemptible. He could not determine.

He vacillated hourly for a fortnight, and Mr. Orkney meanwhile seemed ubiquitous. Wherever he went he met him, and Orkney always stopped and spoke, and asked him coldly how he was.

George would endeavour to reply composedly, but not with success. Then the other would put his eyebrows up, and sigh significantly, and Collier went on his way feeling despicable and ashamed.

"To Be or Not to Be," "The Pound of Flesh"—what a number of titles suggested themselves for the story that might be written! He could not put the thought of it away from him, and one evening he actually found himself sitting at his desk commencing it. It was a foolish proceeding,

but it occupied—more, interested him, and his pen flew rapidly. He treated the subject in a serious narrative.

At one o'clock he came to the point where the end must be led up to. But *how* was it to end? He rose, and began to pace the room, mechanically charging his pipe afresh. It would not draw —where were the wires? He could not think if he did not smoke, and the thing was stopped up.

The wires could not be found; perhaps he had used the last. Formerly he had annexed his wife's hair-pins in such emergencies, and, as a last resource, it occurred to him that if he looked in the wardrobe where her belongings had been put away he would find some.

The key was on his own ring, and he went upstairs. The dead woman's trifles had been stored on the shelves. He saw her work-basket and her dressing-case, and the set of ebony brushes, with "E" on the backs in silver, that he had given her on her last birthday. There was a bonnet she had been trimming when she was taken ill, with the needle still sticking in it.

He paused; what he was doing seemed momentarily sacrilege. Then he opened the dressing-case and lifted the tray.

There *were* some hair-pins scattered at the bottom. There was also a bundle of letters, tied together with ribbon, and directed in a hand-

writing that looked familiar. Collier stared at it. Was he making a mistake—or what had been the purpose of this correspondence? He turned white, and pulled the letters out.

The dates they bore were of the last two years. There was nothing criminal in them, despite their lengthiness, but they were a man's confidential communications to a woman of whom he is fond. They spoke of the writer's "sympathy," of his regret that he could do nothing to alleviate the dreariness of her lot; there were frequent allusions to what "might have been;" and they began, "Dearest Mrs. Collier," and were signed, "Yours with affection, Horace Orkney."

George stumbled out of the bedroom and returned to the "workshop," where he sank into his chair, with knitted brows, thinking. After a while he picked up his pen again, but he did not continue the tale.

"DEAR SIR," (he wrote)—

"I restore you the enclosed letters, for which I have no use. Henceforth I shall make my home in the country with my daughter. I perceive that her mother's untimely decease frustrated your hope of marrying a widow whose attractions would have been accentuated by the possession of nine thousand pounds, and tender you my condolence. The bequest in my will will

stand, but, as you pointed out yourself once, I may live, in the ordinary course of events, for another forty years. Believe me I have every intention of doing so if I can.

"Yours truly,

"GEORGE COLLIER."

And he did, and became a very successful man.

The Body and Soul of Miss Azulay.

"WHEN Ethel Ebden persisted, in spite of her father's arguments and her mother's prayers, it was an instance of the ephemeral strength with which a normally weak and timid nature is liable to startle everybody. No girl more unlikely ever to defy her parents, or to want to go to West Africa as the wife of a missionary, could have been imagined, by all accounts, up to the time she was twenty-two. Yet at twenty-two and a half she did both things. She left the house in Lancaster Gate, and her mare, and her maid, and a mountain of millinery that she would never have occasion to use, and sailed with the man of her choice to convert the heathens in Abeokuta, where she was the only white woman within fifty miles, and was found, six weeks after their arrival, lying on the floor in a dead faint, induced by the fact that she had stroked the black body of a negro in the dusk, under the impression that it was her husband's dog.

"Eight months later her nervous terrors were terminated by death. She was buried on the *veldt*, and the widower read her funeral service. The daughter to whom she had given birth, was adopted by her maternal grandparents, and brought up among all the advantages that her mother had renounced. The blood of the Society girl and the missionary is mingled in my own veins; the child born in a hut and educated in Hyde Park was I. My friend, I do not know whether you are a believer in hereditary or prenatal influences, but I am too strange a mixture to make any man happy as his wife, and I shall marry no one—be comforted in the reflection. Remember your career and forget me. You looked awful when I saw you in the Bois to-day. —GERALDINE."

I re-read her letter—how many times! Yes, I looked awful, and I felt worse, for I was passionately in love with her—none the less passionately because I was only five and twenty, and she was a few years my senior; and since she had rejected me a fortnight before, I had been in a fair way to drink myself into delirium tremens.

Let me set down the manner of my first meeting with her, for I fell under her spell at once.

I had gone to the Vaudeville, and she was in

a box—the most beautiful woman in the house. She bowed to the man who had accompanied me, and of course I asked him who she was.

"Miss Azulay—isn't she superb! She is very rich, and rather curious. Subscribes largely to religious missions, and at the same time spends a fortune on dress; gives one the idea of being indifferent to men, and, for all that, seems bored alone. She has taken a flat on the Boulevard Haussmann, and lives with a "companion"—the faded party beside her. Would you care to be introduced?"

"Really?"

"Oh yes! I'll take you round in the entr'acte, if you like."

She received me graciously, and the diffidence with which I had entered was dispelled. A closer view served to deepen my admiration. She was, perhaps, thirty, and many of the things that have been written of the woman of thirty recurred to me as we talked. Though she was still single, I was certain that life had held emotions for her. Experience had given to the lovely face just that suggestion of mystery—for want of a better word—which a young man finds so fascinating in the opposite sex. For all her serenity—and she was mondaine from the flowers in her hat to the hem of her frock—here was one who had suffered, I told myself; though the gaze

of the grand gray eyes was so indifferent, there was a shadow in them too. But I did not think she had ever gone to anybody to be comforted in her grief; the mouth was too firm and proud for that. If she had cried, she had cried alone.

Very ridiculous, you say, these deductions, in the first five minutes I conversed with her? It is quite true; but remember my age—and then, studying Art in Paris, I was inclined to be rather French in my mental attitude.

A little landscape of mine had been accepted by the Champ-de-Mars that season, and she had seen it, and spoke to me about it. She was very nice to me, very sympathetic. I found myself saying things to her quite frankly, things that do not usually spring to one's lips with a new acquaintance in a box at the Vaudeville; and she seemed interested, and encouraged my communicativeness. When I rose at length, she gave me permission to call on her. "If you will come in one afternoon, when you are able to spare the time, I shall be glad," she said. I returned to my fauteuil in a seventh heaven of delight. My friend's amused comments jarred on me, and I scarcely knew what the third act was about. I was in love already.

Well, it will easily be understood that I went to the Boulevard Haussmann, and that I went again, and again. I always found her just

returned from her drive, and, without even troubling to remove her hat and gloves, she would sink into a chair, and talk to me as informally as an elder sister. Sometimes, too, she came to my studio. At others, I encountered her in the Bois. Scarcely a day passed, at last, without my seeing her somewhere. Paris no longer meant Art to me, but Geraldine Azulay. I went to bed to dream of her; I woke up thinking of her; I regretted that I was not a portrait-painter, or a poet, that I might express something of my homage in my work.

The development I have recorded. One afternoon I confessed the truth; I told her I adored her. She had never flirted with me, and there was no trace of gratification in her manner as she heard. She said she was sorry; and it was not a "phrase." If ever a woman was sincere with a man from the beginning to the end, Miss Azulay was sincere with me!

I had expected nothing else, and yet—anomalous as it sounds—the finality of her answer was a terrible blow. I did what all boys do under similar circumstances, I dissipated; I neglected my profession, and behaved in a way that I blush to recall. I knew I looked ill, and I wanted Miss Azulay to know it too. I threw myself in her path for the express purpose.

She had deserved better things of me, and I

realized it when that letter came. It was the letter of a woman to one for whom she feels a genuine affection; it made me ashamed of myself. I re-read it, as I have said, until I knew it by heart. Then it seemed to me that, since she liked me so much, my cause might not be hopeless after all. The idea was youthful, but exciting. I resolved to appeal to her a second time, and the same day I called on her again.

She had, I learnt, just come in; nevertheless she did not keep me waiting. She entered the room almost as I sat down. Her costume was new to me, and I thought how admirably it became her. She greeted me with a smile, and then stood before the mirror putting up her white veil among the roses and the ribbons of her hat, affecting not to notice my agitation.

"Eh bien," she said, turning, "and is my friend going to be sensible? Is that what he has come to say?"

"Yes," I answered, "I have come to tell you I am going to be sensible."

"Thank you! I mean that. Now give me all your news."

"But I must always love you, because I can't help it. Only I won't make a fool of myself in the way I have been doing."

"But, child, I don't want you to love me either

—not as you do at least! I thought all that was understood?"

"Geraldine, is there *no* chance for me? Not if I am patient, if I wait, and make a name?"

"No."

"Oh, you are cruel! Why?"

"Because I am not in love with you, in the first place. That's reason enough."

"In time——"

"In time I shall be forty, and lose my figure, and there will be crow's-feet round my eyes. In time you may be famous, and sell a picture for two hundred and fifty thousand francs. In time many things may happen; but *one* never will—I shall not marry you! Have you seen Sarah in her new piece? Come, let us forget this nonsense."

"*I* never shall forget."

"You make me angry with you," she said sharply.

"And why?"

"Because I believe you mean it."

"Indeed I mean it!" I declared.

"If I weren't fond of you," she said with a shrug, "I should not care—if you chose to be silly, you might! But I *am* fond of you; interested in your career. I hate—yes, I do, I hate myself for having made you think about me so stupidly. I wish I had never been friends with

you; I wanted to help you, and do you lots of good, and instead I have done nothing but harm." She put her delicate gloved hand on my sleeve with a change of tone that was almost wistful: "Do be strong, there's a nice boy, to—to oblige me."

"I can't," I groaned. "Oh, I can't! You don't know—I can't tell you—how I have been suffering; my life is a hell. If you are so fond of me, why don't you take pity on me? You could make me happy easily enough. You pretend it makes you wretched to see me miserable; you pretend——"

"Hush!" she said, "don't throw doubts on my affection for you. It mayn't be what you want, but it is very real!"

"I beg your pardon," I muttered. "I'll leave you. You are very 'fond' of me indeed—what you call 'fond'! My life is spoilt, and you are kind enough to try to patch it up with pretty words. I wish I were dead, and you say gently, 'how sorry I am!' It is very generous of you, and I am very grateful. Good-bye, Miss Azulay."

"Stop," she said.

She glanced at the clock, and trembled. Her face had turned so white that she alarmed me.

"Come back at seven," she said, "and dine with me. You shall know whether I am sincere

or not. Come back to dinner, and you shall talk to me again."

I stood gazing at her, dumfounded.

"I am quite serious. Remember, at seven o'clock. I will marry you, or cure you—I promise you that! Now go."

I descended to the street as one in a dream. She would marry me or cure me, she had said. Staggered as I was, I still understood that her intention was to cure me. But how? What could she say that would alter my desire? Nothing! I had her promise, and I would hold her to it. I wandered on half dazed with joy. My pulses quivered with suspense.

The impression of that interval is with me now. The sun had set, but dusk had not yet fallen, and the golden domes and turrets of the Printemps rose gorgeously into an opal sky. Paris stretched around me clear and mauve—the brightness faded, but the light not gone, the trees deepening to purple, the electric lamps shining vividly in the reflections of the dying day. On the boulevards it was the hour of vermouth and absinthe, and itinerant vendors of views and toys stopped at the little tables every minute to display their wares. A constant stream of pedestrians flowed by the cafés; now and again a woman cast a sidelong glance at one of the occupants of the chairs. The guttural cry of "*La Presse*—

La Presse!" was everywhere. Artists and mendicants, club-men and cocottes poured past me incessantly. I saw without knowing that I saw, heeded without being conscious of any attention. I had reached the Café de la Paix, and sat there motionless, waiting for the high clock to my left to show me it was time to dress.

I mounted to the flat as my watch pointed to seven, and was obliged to ring twice. I was admitted by Geraldine's maid—an old woman whom I had often wondered she retained.

"I am sorry you should have been kept waiting, sir," she said; "I was with Miss Azulay, and the other servants are all out."

"Oh?" I answered. "What has happened?"

"They are out by Miss Azulay's orders, sir. *I* am to wait at table to-night."

It sounded rather odd, but I refrained from any further question. I went into the drawing-room, and was told that my hostess would be with me directly. Apparently the "companion" was out also, for five—ten—minutes passed while I was alone.

It was nearly a quarter of an hour before the door was opened softly, and Miss Azulay came in. Her entrance had been so quiet that I was unaware of it till she spoke. Then I looked up, and saw her standing on the threshold. As I

write, the ghastliness of the moment returns to me; I feel the shudder in my veins again, just as I felt it while I looked! She was in evening toilette; the satin trailed the floor, and jewels glittered in her gown. Her arms and bosom were bare, and I saw that she was—— I cannot say it; I cannot put the word! From her neck down! Oh, God help her! only her beautiful face had escaped! I remained voiceless, frozen with horror. If I lived to be a thousand, I should never forget the awfulness of that silence, as we stared at each other with distended eyes across the room; I should never forget the spectacle of the tortured face lifted to me from a body from which her mind and soul appeared to shrink.

It was she who spoke at last.

"I wrote you I was too strange a mixture to marry," she said harshly; "now you understand me!"

I could not answer; my tongue would not move.

"Don't look at me for a moment," she continued; "give me time to compose myself. I have done for you what I have done for no one else in the world!"

She turned her back on me, and I heard her sob.

"Geraldine!" I cried.

"Sh! I am all right again now. I don't mean to break down—don't fear. I am a strong woman; I have need to be! Come, I am quite steady. There is brandy there—you had better take some."

"Speak to me," I stammered. "Tell me what it means."

"I was born so," she said, "that's all. Don't you remember my letter? My mother did not know; she was spared the sight. *I* did not know either till I was nearly ten; they kept it from me as long as possible. I actually thought that all children were the same. I recollect my agony of shame when I found out! I loathed the sight of myself; I was frightened at my own limbs, and used to fall into fits of terror in the bed."

"You poor girl!"

"Don't pity me, or I shall cry. Ah, dinner is ready—let us go in."

The maid had announced it. We went into the other room, and made a pretence of eating. Mercifully the meal was a short one, and we were soon left at the table alone.

"I promised you I would cure you," said Miss Azulay, "and you'll admit I've kept my word. No, don't speak; I know all you would say! And please don't think for an instant that I'm wounded, dear! If you had wanted to marry me still, you would have embarrassed me very much

to tell you the truth, for I am not fond of you in that way a little bit. But I am very, very, very fond of you in another way, and I felt I would rather humiliate myself as I have than let you go on suffering, when I could stop it so easily." She hesitated a second, and then touched me gently with her black hand. "You'll never tell any one while I live?"

"Oh, by Heaven——!" I exclaimed.

"That's enough; I'm sure you won't! No one suspects, you know—you didn't suspect yourself—I manage to prevent that! 'Poor Miss Azulay'—that's how you'll think of me in future, eh? 'Poor Miss Azulay'!"

"Have you never—never cared for anybody at all?"

"Never. Thank Heaven, never! That used to be my fear when I was a girl; I used to be afraid I might! It isn't likely to happen now; the danger is almost past. But if I ever did"—her chin dropped upon her palms, and she gazed through me into futurity—"if I ever did, do you know what I have always determined to do?"

I watched her as she paused.

"I've determined to do what I have done with you to-night; I should let him see what I am with his own eyes. And if he wanted to marry me then—if he did, if he could!—I would be his wife. And... I would worship that man! I would

give him such a love as no man has ever known! I would—— Oh," she broke off, "please God I shall never have to make the trial! I pray I shan't, because . . . because I know so well how he'd look—I saw the look on you—and the ordeal would kill me. Only . . . if ever you *should* hear of Miss Azulay's marrying, my friend, you will understand that there is a wonderful creature in the world—a man who fell in love with a woman's mind, and not her body! You will remember my determination, and know that when I fulfilled it, a man was still capable of taking me in his arms. Ah, that isn't a reproach—I wish I hadn't said it; go away from me! There, give me your hand, if you will, and say 'good night' and 'good-bye.' It is late."

"You are leaving Paris?"

"To-morrow. For London."

"And when shall I see you again? I *may* see you again?"

"Some day! This evening will last you for a long while." She smiled sadly. "Now go—go," she repeated. "Adieu!"

I did not see her again, though shortly afterwards I returned to London myself. The world is small, but London is very large, and Miss Azulay and I did not meet. Nearly five years passed before I heard of her indeed, and when I did so,

it was, strangely enough, in New York, where I had been obliged to go on business. I was glancing at a newspaper in Dorlon's one night, and I dropped it, sick and faint. The paragraph ran :—

"SEQUEL TO AN ELOPEMENT.—Miss Geraldine Azulay—an Englishwoman here—concluded to console Colonel Arkas Doyle for his failure to obtain a divorce. This is the lady it was whispered the petitioner proposed to marry, if the law would free him from the degraded virago who bears his name. Now it appears that Miss Azulay was not disposed to let her own and her lover's life be marred by the law's refusal. She promised to live with the Colonel as his wife, and it transpires that the pair left New York City yesterday for the Falls' Hotel, Buffalo, where they were taken by the hotel-clerk for the conventional bride and bride-groom. At an early hour this morning the lady committed suicide by poison. She was discovered on a couch in the dressing-room, quite dead, with an empty phial in her hand. It can only be supposed that her sacrifice was no sooner made than she repented of it, and, distracted by remorse, destroyed herself. Evidently the first intention of the unhappy woman had been to fly from the man for whose sake she had renounced so much, for she had carefully attired

herself in her travelling-costume, and was wearing gloves."

But I knew better! I understood Miss Azulay had loved at last, and that her courage had failed her until it was too late.

In Rerum Naturâ.

"You have done me the honour, my good friend, to ask me to be your wife. You reminded me that I am still a young woman, and urged that my widowhood—a solitary state without children—has already exceeded the longest limit that Society or sentiment can require. I answered you, 'What you wish is impossible.' I told you something else; I said, 'The woman you revere is worthy neither of your love nor your respect, for she is a coward!' In your turn you replied, 'It is impossible.' But it is true! And now that you are gone, and I am sitting here alone, having broken my engagements for the evening, and seeking no other companions than the pictures in the fire, something prompts me to explain to you the words I used—to bare my heart for your examination (perhaps also for your pity), and to show to you how constant, and yet contemptible, a soul may be.

"On the table where I write, the servant has

just placed a pyramid of hyacinths. Somebody has sent them to me, I do not know who; but the perfume fills the room; and Balzac spoke truly when he said that perfume reminds one more vividly than words. The scent of these flowers is associated in my mind with the delights of my youth: the spring when I was a girl of seventeen, and wore muslin frocks, and went out in the woods, needing no other cosmétique than my blushes, to walk with my lover—the husband you ask me to forget.

"I am no longer alone, save for the fire! The past is with me as I inhale the odour of the hyacinths; and Lucien has come back, out of his grave, to reproach me with his eyes where you told me of your love this afternoon.

"Let me arrange my thoughts, and accuse myself with proper method.

"I lived in a quiet corner of Brittany, with the aunt who recently bequeathed me the fortune I possess. Our ménage was of the simplest; for, though my relative was a wealthy woman, her tastes made small demand on her resources, and so far from seeking to outshine the community which formed our world, she praised, and even imitated, its economies.

"In looking back, the life I led appears to me most frightfully dull until one May. In that month there descended upon us a young artist.

He had come to the place to sketch, and had brought a letter of introduction to a neighbour of ours, which—oddly enough, as he told me afterwards—he had presented. 'For, as a rule,' said he, 'I never present such things, they are a source of equal annoyance to one's self and the person to whom one is recommended. But one must accept them in gratitude for the kindness by which the stupidity is prompted.'

"The neighbour to whom he had been introduced was a valued friend of my aunt's, and at an 'evening' shortly after his arrival—an evening of syrup-and-water and sugared cakes—we met.

"I shall not detail the history of our acquaintance, nor will I declare that, fondly as I loved him later, I left the house that night with any more serious feeling than the sensation of novel pleasure which the admiration of a talented and handsome man would naturally awaken in the breast of a girl reared in such seclusion as I had been. Women, moreover, fall in love—that odious phrase—far less frequently at first sight than men. For in woman love is primarily intellectual, and is born of knowledge; whereas in man, I think, it is born in the senses, and reaches the mind last. No, I will not weary you with the chronicle of our courtship; I will only say that a sympathy sprang into life between us so strong that one

afternoon—the day before he was to return to Paris—he asked me to be his wife.

"We were standing before the easel where he had been painting—in the wood adjacent to our home. Nevertheless, the picture on the canvas was not a landscape, but a portrait of the girl I used to be.

"'It is finished,' he said, putting the brush aside, 'and I am going away!' And then he asked me was I sorry.

"I cannot recall my answer. How is it that the words of others live in the memory so long after one's own have faded? I cannot recall my answer, but I remember the next thing he said as if it happened yesterday. I remember how we walked back together into the presence of my aunt. And I remember the sunshine touched her face and smile through the window as she turned at our approach, and watched us—curiously, it almost seemed—nearing her along the path.

"The scent of the hyacinths is very powerful; the room has grown oppressive. Wait, my friend, till I have breathed some air.

"We were betrothed for five years. I have told you that Lucien was young and a painter; to add that he was poor would be a pleonasm; and his pride revolted at the notion of owing everything to my aunt. It is the custom to condemn

these long engagements, but ours, I am certain, made fruition sweeter. During the waiting we had learnt to know each other so completely that when we wedded we made no adventure—we merely fulfilled our dreams; it was not an experiment, our marriage, but a realization. Never did a woman love more passionately than I; never was a woman given more absolute devotion in return. He told me everything—his hopes, his moods, every incident of his past. I read his favourite books, that he might have no experiences I did not share. Often he would reply to a thought I had not spoken. You ask me my ideal of perfect happiness? I answer, 'My life with Lucien.'

"We had gone to Venice and were working there. I say *we* were working, and I must have explained our union very poorly if the phrase seems bad to you. I was his comrade, his critic, his inspiration! It was when we had been in Venice six months that I fell ill. That it was serious I did not at first suspect, but it soon became apparent that I had contracted typhoid fever. Lucien's anxiety was pitiful to see: he beseeched the doctor for encouragement that he could not give; he upbraided himself for bringing me there; he would sit beside me day and night, his eyes haggard with despair.

"Of much that occurred at this time I am necessarily ignorant; but one evening I came

back out of delirium to understand that I could not live.

"The room was in shadow; the one bright spot a disc of light upon the ceiling, thrown upward by the lamp. Presently I became aware that Lucien was with me, and that he was crying. I do not know if it was then that I understood I was dying, or if I had heard it earlier in the day. But I recollect that he took my hand, and sobbed over it; and feebly—because my voice was weak and my wits still wandered—I strove to comfort him.

"The last vestige of his self-control deserted him at this, and his arm crept beneath my head and neck, and he prayed that I might be spared to him; pleaded to die himself if he must lose me.

"I remember dimly saying to him once, 'How long?' meaning how long was it to be before the end came; and next it was borne upon me that I could only expect to live about an hour.

"Lucien's face was white and working; he must have been distraught, or he would not have done what he did. I had been given morphia through the fever, and a phial of it stood upon the shelf. I heard him murmuring that we would not separate; that we would go together into the unknown as we had lived together in the world.

I said to him—everything was confused to me—I said to him, 'What is it you say, Lucien? I cannot hear.' He answered, 'I am going with you, Beloved; we will enter the new life at the same time!'

"He came and cast himself beside me on the bed. When he kissed me I could smell the morphia in his breath. We rested beside each other on the same pillow, and I lay in silence, watching the lamplight quivering overhead. From time to time he pressed me to him, and we kissed again. The patch of light above me took queer, fantastic shapes. I felt drowsy, and his voice when he spoke sounded farther off. 'We are going together—what will it be like?' he said. I wanted to reply to him, but I was very tired; —and the light on the ceiling went out.

"When I came to myself I was in another room, and I asked for him to be brought to me. They said he had been obliged to leave the city, but that he would return in a few days. They added that the crisis of my illness had been miraculously passed just when I was despaired of, and told me I was getting well.

"I listened to them—and remembered.

Later in the day I was left alone, and I heard strange noises in the house. I raised myself in bed, and, through the window, I saw Lucien's

coffin being carried down the steps. It was my welcome back to health!

"You may marvel that it did not kill me; *I* have marvelled too. But it did not; and you know now why I shall never re-marry. In the irony of fate Lucien made the Great Journey before myself, and I feel that ever since he has been waiting for me. I like to think also that to him, whose standard of comparison is the Eternal, the intervening years may seem more paltry than they do to me.

"Why, if I find the delay so weary, have I not done the thing that *he* did, and gone to him before? Let me whisper: Because I have not the courage; because *I am afraid!* Yes, I will be candid if it shames me. It is no scruple of religion which keeps me back; twice I have held the means in my hand—and I was *afraid!*

"There is something else, for my confession shall be complete. On such a day as this was, when the air is mild, and the people in the streets look happy, and the trees, as I take my drive, are fresh and green, I sometimes feel that it is pleasanter to live. The world wears its gayest frock to me, and I am content. He died to die with me—and I am 'content.' It is well said!

"The oppression of these hyacinths is stifling me—Good night!"

A Mere Incident.

He wished it had been issued at another price. He wished it from the moment the specimen cover was submitted to him for approval, with "One Shilling" in aggressive capitals at the top; he wished it still more when the familiar title began to greet him from the railway bookstalls; and most of all he wished it when his prophetic dread was realized by the first reviewer, and a weekly journal appeared with half a dozen commendatory lines on Walter Cunninghame's "Shilling Shocker."

If it had been eleven-pence, he contended, or even one-and-a-penny, that hideous, mal-à-propos designation would have been impossible; but his publishers had smiled the objection to scorn, and, innocent of a "murder," a "mystery," or a "mesmeric attraction," Mr. Cunninghame had involuntarily perpetrated a shilling shocker, and must abide the consequences.

Now, amongst the multifarious circumstances

under which it is unwise to yield to the particular form of vanity that lures a man into endeavouring to make his mark as a writer of novels in London, may be accounted the condition when necessity ordains that his existence shall be devoted to totally different pursuits in the region of Bombay. Yet this is what the author of "The Memoirs of Mona Leigh" had done precisely. Six months ago nothing could have been further from his thoughts; six months ago he would have told you he had given up "scribbling" with his teens; that he was going back to England to see his people and enjoy himself—well, then, primarily to enjoy himself, if you *would* be so accurate—adding very probably that twelve years in India made a considerable alteration in the ideas of most persons, and in his case had left him with no especial illusions that he could contrive to recollect on any subject under the sun.

Cynicism is popularly supposed to result from one's experience of an overrated world; it might be more justly attributed to disappointment at the unfulfilled ambitions of one's own youth; and Walter Cunninghame's philosophy failed him directly at the test of old surroundings. In London he had dreamed as a boy; in London he wrote again as a man; listlessly at first, impelled by a sudden whim in his rooms one evening, with a pipe between his lips and a

pocket-book upon his knee; and then fiercely, doggedly, rising early and working late, while the pile of manuscript waxed bulkier beside his desk, and folk, commenting on his unsociability, oracularly observed, "It was a pity Cunninghame had not married out there, for he had come home every whit as eccentric as when he left."

The form of composition to which he set himself was the diary of a woman. He put into it his heart and his brains. If Sir Joshua Reynolds' definition of Genius had been complete this novel should have startled civilization; as it was, it did nothing of the kind. He received a cheque in remuneration sufficient to keep him in cab-fares and cigars for the remainder of his visit, and his acquaintances informed him it was "very nice." "Very nice!" exclaimed his friends. "An agreeable little story to pass away an idle hour!" declared the critics. "I raced through it at a sitting," he was assured by the most fervid of his admirers, "I was so anxious to discover the end!" And Mr. Cunninghame, bowing his acknowledgments the while, thought bitterly, "Let me get back to India and the counting-house, for if this be all the effect my deliberation can produce, God help me, I shall never make an author!" It is unfortunate for your chances of contentment when you have expected the public to read your novel as you wrote it.

After all, *cui bono?* He had been *living* within his pages from the outset, waiting occasionally a morning, a day, for the word which, of all others, could he grasp it, would convey his intention most exactly. Springing from the bed, he had sought, exhausted, to correct some line that failed to give him satisfaction, to substitute an expression more felicitous. He had been by turns tender and satirical; he had revised and repolished; he had done the utmost of which he was capable, and he had learnt the result was "very nice." *Cui bono?* he mused, for the twentieth time this afternoon, where he lay back in the compartment of the express that was bearing him northward to Birkenhead; he had written a "Shilling Shocker," and now he was going out to India and commerce, once more; and all the unhinted hopes that had sustained him were over, ended like—— He paused in the midst of his meditation for a simile, grimly watching the tiny wreath of blue circling from his cigar point; "aptly enough, like this, in smoke," he concluded, tossing the stump through the window with an impatient gesture; it had been one of the last box his achievement had procured him.

Birkenhead is not calculated to exhilarate the unaccustomed visitor all at once. The roar of Liverpool does not penetrate here; not a hum

from the great city on the opposite bank floats across the river to disturb the all-pervading silence of the lesser town, which has long since assumed an air of fixed depression, deprecating geography, as though abased by the comparison it provokes. And when he had dismissed the notion of crossing by ferry as too much bother, and purposely lingered over a very creditable meal at the hotel where he engaged an apartment for the night, Mr. Cunninghame was sorely puzzled to determine what to do with himself.

There was a theatre, he ascertained, which would open some hours later for the performance of a metropolitan success by a touring company, and there was a park—the latter Birkenhead's feature par excellence. Perhaps it was natural in a man, whose home for an indefinite period was likely to be Bombay, that he should bend his steps in the direction of the woodland, glad that his farewell glimpse of England, albeit taken in an unfamiliar place, should include a thoroughly English scene.

It was very pleasant under the trees beside the water in the autumn sunshine; so pleasant, and withal so quiet, that he decided he alone must have selected the resort, as, after skirting the best part of two hundred acres in a ramble, he sank abruptly upon a bench, remembering he had encountered no living creature but a dog. The

spot in which he found himself was screened from the broader walk by a clump of beeches; fronting him was a kind of hollow where the stream resolved itself into an irregular basin fringed by shrubs. He allowed his eyes to rest for an instant on the view in perfect satisfaction; then his gaze, wandering, took in a nearer object, and he became sensible of a paper-covered novel lying at the extremity of the seat. He was very fresh at Literature, and he said "By Jove!" It was his own book.

He picked it up, opening it haphazard at the seventh page. There was a marginal note appended to some sarcastic reflection upon friendship he had deemed clever. He started slightly as he observed it; the remark was, "Nasty sentiment!"

In bold, erect, feminine chirography, this philosophaster's conceit was condemned as a "nasty sentiment," and he smiled. The censure gratified him; he was flattered to perceive that by one person, at least, his composition had been considered, and not skimmed. On page thirty the pencil had been employed again:—

"Are you a cynic or a fatalist, Mona Leigh? I cannot say; I ask myself if I like you, and I answer no, 'no' a hundred times. Brilliant, unscrupulous, I am alive to your abilities, but I would not shake hands with you!"

Here was the analysis with a vengeance! Who was this reader who declined to shake hands with his heroine, and called her "unscrupulous"? Presently he discovered a retraction, a pretty apology: a paragraph that had delighted him in the manuscript was marked; everywhere his favourite sentences had been annotated—those sentences which he had vainly hoped would attract attention of the professional reviewers. At the end of his "Dream Chapter" was written—

"A dream at once repulsive and beautiful, because so wholly typical of finite humanity and God's infinite power!"

He let the volume drop upon his knees, and fell to speculating on the personality of his commentator. Then he raised it again, hesitated, and hurriedly referred to the final sheet. It was only a line of seven words that he was seeking, but it was his pet passage, and it had escaped all notice by the "fervid admirers;" it was doubly underscored! Beneath it the reader had added—

"Dear little story, I am sorry to finish you, you have given me pleasure!"

Well, she dabbled in letters herself, and she was young; it demanded no exceptional discernment to guess that! It was evidenced by the exalted tone of the rough jottings. He wondered merely who she was, and how it happened she had forgotten the book she had been at so much

pains to show belonged to her. Possibly she might still be close by, he mused, and would be returning. As the notion occurred to him he looked round, but a moment too late; for—even as he turned, her property retained in his clasp—he met her glance.

She had come across the grass, between the lichened trunks that formed a background to her where she paused; her brown hair, curly, not in curls, hung untrammelled about her shoulders; she wore nun's veiling, the palest of pale pinks, and a broad-brimmed hat of straw trimmed with a spray of ivy. She might have been a dryad attired by a nineteenth-century milliner; and she was unmistakably but seventeen years old.

As he saw her he was conscious of three distinct sensations. The order was manlike: the first, an appreciation of her loveliness; the second, a resentful astonishment at her youth; and the last (because the bulk of her comments had been panegyric), a profound respect for her faculties of discrimination.

"This is yours, I suppose? I am afraid I have been taking a liberty, but I believed it ownerless!"

Her manners were hopelessly behind the Bayswater-Clapham-West-Central standard of British young-ladydom (or else she had been educated above it), for she said "Thank you"

without having been introduced. Worse, this audacious little person in nun's veiling further exclaimed, "Oh, my gloves!" and repeated the egregious impropriety of acknowledging a stranger's civility when he found them.

They had fallen under the bench, and, groping on the gravel, Mr. Cunninghame also cast about for some method of detaining her.

"I hope you do not think I have been guilty of a very awful offence," he questioned gravely; "the law would tell me I should have explored for a policeman." Presuming his object had been to make her laugh, it failed. She replied—

"Pray don't name it. I have been wandering about as if the park were my private garden. Good afternoon!"

"And my attentions to your book are sufficiently explained?"

"There is no need for any explanation at all; it would have been my own fault if my book had been lost; good day."

He could see but one means open to attain his end.

"Because," he said suddenly, and he looked her straight in the eyes as he spoke, "there is another excuse I should like to offer—I wrote it!"

He had startled her out of her composure now. She clasped her hands with a little foreign gesture of consternation.

"You wrote it?" she cried piteously. The blood flamed into her cheeks and brow, dyeing them crimson; there were both wonder and incredulity in her voice.

"Permit me!" He felt in his note-case, producing a card, on which was engraved, "Mr. Walter Cunninghame, 1, Victoria Mansions," and gave it to her with a bow. "You see, I am no impostor," he continued quietly; "I may really claim to be the creator of the 'nasty sentiment'!"

"You wrote it?" she reiterated; "you wrote it? Oh, what must you think of me!"

"Don't you understand?" he said; "you have paid the greatest compliment a reader can pay to a 'shilling shocker'; you have searched for more than a sensation and a plot!"

The blush faded from her face, and she smiled. He observed how very short her upper lip was, and that the teeth below were particularly small and regular.

"Then you are not angry?" she asked timidly.

"Angry! You have made me very proud!"

"I dare say if I hadn't, you would not have told me you were the author?"

"More than probable; I should have preserved as rigid a silence on the subject of my literary flights as you would have done about yours!"

"About mine! What do you mean?"

"I mean you write yourself; 'not necessarily for publication,' perhaps, because you are too young, but you write for all that! Novels—I am not sure about the novels for the same reason; short stories more possibly; fragments likeliest of all, because they come easiest to imaginative natures, and, being a brunette, you have just ten times the amount of individuality accorded to the ordinary English 'Mees,' with a putty character and hay-coloured hair!"

"This is uncanny!" exclaimed the girl.

"Not at all," responded Mr. Cunninghame, "it is interest!"

She drew herself up as if offended. Before he had talked with her five minutes he perceived one of her greatest attractions lay in the endless variety of her moods, which were reflected at once in her expression, her features, her attitude itself. These swift transitions reminded you of an April day, excepting that in each she seemed more irresistible than the last, and, conversing with her, you were always desirous of the pleasurable surprise she would afford you by the next. When she laughed, you doubted that she could be capable of any deep emotion; when she was serious, you marvelled if this was the countenance that had been so radiant an instant before. He experienced the longing which,

when it does enter a man's mind, is a far higher tribute to the woman's fascinations than the mere anxiety to extend their acquaintance—he wished he had known her a long while already.

"Forgive me," he said, "I was rude!"

For a man to ask a girl to forgive him is to advance a stride on the road towards familiarity. There is so much difference between "Forgive me" and "I beg your pardon."

"Do you know," he resumed, "your criticism has almost encouraged me to make another attempt, to fancy I could turn out something better. And yet you are unfair in places too. Why do you confound the writer's views with his personages'? Given a mondaine and an ingénue, their sentiments would be precisely opposite, wouldn't they? but he can't be regarded as agreeing with both!"

"The truth of that is forgotten when the distinction between the men isn't observed as fully," she retorted—"the reader's carelessness, of course, but all the same the author's fault. Why is a woman almost always the central figure in a man's novel? why is your hero so puny a creature in comparison? For instance, you often take a wicked woman, and write a work describing her vicissitudes; do you ever do so much about the adventures of a bad man?"

"Because, even in their failings, women are

the more interesting; because masculine character is much less diverse. I know a dozen girls who would make engaging heroines in fiction; I have never met one man who, put in as he stands for the hero, would not be disgusting before the end of the second volume!"

"You are hard on your own sex, Mr. Cunninghame!"

"My own sex," said Mr. Cunninghame, meditatively, "after due contemplation, I have discovered to be beasts. That sounds conceited, doesn't it, but do me the justice to remember I am not excepting myself in any degree. We are all beasts; some of us drop our disguise more frequently than others—that's all."

And he felt himself "a beast," as he said it, for encouraging her to remain here with him now, when he knew he should object to his sister doing a similar thing. Only it was extremely agreeable, and he did not mean any harm.

"I wonder if you recollect," he said, "an announcement the author of 'Court Royal' makes in his preface—but perhaps you don't read prefaces?"

"Yes," she answered, "I do; after the story, when the writer's allusions to it are doubly significant."

"The passage I mean is terse: 'There are two heroines, each the focussing of the good

qualities of the two groups, and two heroes, each the concentration of the infirmities of the same.' That is all; he volunteers no explanation of this adjustment of attributes, no reason why the exemplification of excellence and imperfection should not be reversed. The course, in a word, is so absolutely natural, he trusts to the readers' intelligence to accept it without discussion, and this in a preface in which he is avowedly not crediting them with overmuch. Don't go yet; sit down!"

"I ought to go!" she said.

"Please don't," he persisted; "you have plenty of time!"

"And you want to kill yours?"

"Well, perhaps; though, without compliments, I should beg you to stay anyhow!"

"Poor, maligned Time!" she exclaimed, "what plots we weave for its destruction, and how fond we are of it all the while!"

"Are we?" he demurred laughingly. "I'm not so sure of it!"

"We are, and I'll give you an illustration: you have a predilection for Literature, you want to excel in it—granted so far? Well, putting down a great work that has delighted you, do you ever feel, 'I would give ten years of my life to have written that book! Could I make that production mine, I would gladly be ten years older

to-day?' Not you, not one person in a million! And what does it prove? Logically, that the love of Time, we are always pretending we want to kill, is one of the strongest passions in human nature!"

He shook his head. "In your case the capital is so large, you could afford to be prodigal in your investments," he said; "if, at twenty, ten years could purchase fame, we should all be famous. You argue from the standpoint of youth."

"Which is a polite way of telling me I am talking nonsense! It always means that, or at least one always fancies so, as inevitably as when people begin 'With all due respect' we understand it is merely a prologue to something in the very opposite direction. I assure you I am by no means indignant when I am called young, even in the most opprobrious sense of the term; I always think it such a pity that, when it is with us, youth should be a thing we are ashamed of and endeavour to conceal, only to envy and imitate it as soon as it is lost. It seems so dreadful it should not be capable of exciting anything but our weaknesses."

"It is like a bird," he said; "it flies so swiftly that we don't note the brilliance of its plumage till it's dead." He felt this was rather good on the spur of the moment, and tried to look as if

he didn't. "If I were an editor, I should ask you to let me see some of your manuscripts."

"You would be so disappointed," she rejoined frankly; "they are quite silly to everybody but my mother; she knows me, and she reads between the lines, or perhaps I should say she makes allowances. The ones I like least are best—those I intend for recitation."

"You recite?"

"Oh yes, I am an actress; I am on tour now with the company that is playing at the 'Royal' this week, but when I am in town I often attend 'at homes;' and then original compositions are useful—one can be sure they haven't been heard before. I don't pose as the authoress, though," she added brightly, "as it is, they sometimes get well 'noticed;' if I acknowledged them as my own, the people would cry, 'How dare she, that child!'"

He turned to her with a new astonishment; the stage was the last vocation with which he would have associated her, and a fresh phase of her character seemed unfolding itself with her every sentence.

"And do you write when you are—'on tour'?"

"I really don't write much anywhere; I don't believe anybody should try to follow two professions, or she will get on in neither!"

"A proverb asserts two strings to one's bow are advisable,' suggested Mr. Cunninghame.

"And another one says something quite to the contrary about two stools. Never substantiate an argument with a proverb, you can be worsted with your own weapons so easily. No, the pursuits most practicable for a beginner to couple, I should imagine, are Literature and the Bar, and then I have heard there is a prejudice against 'writing barristers'; but, at least after he is 'called,' Briefless has nothing to do but go to his chambers every morning, and wait till the solicitors send. With us it is different: we have to do our own soliciting, and hunt up engagements for ourselves. It is difficult to 'woo the Muse' to advantage indoors when you are conscious you ought to be out and worrying the managers instead, to win bread-and-butter!"

"Yes," he assented, "but both your callings are anyhow congenial, I presume; both paths attract you, though you may waver at the cross-road! With me——" Confidences were springing to his lips; he checked the impulse, and traced designs among the pebbles with his cane.

"With you——?" she said.

He looked up, met her gaze, and continued: "With me it is different! My mission in life is to conduct a business in India, a business that devolved upon me at my father's death; there is

no shirking it, the responsibilities are too grave. This production of mine was a 'holiday task,' done during my first trip to England since I went out to Bombay twelve years ago. Now the holiday is over, the boat sails to-morrow; it may be twice twelve years before I see home again!"

"I am sorry," she said gently; "I think I understand!"

"I put so much of what I felt into these pages, in parts they are really a reflection of myself. As a boy I hated all mention of the House—I wanted to be a writer, a painter, anything approaching Art; I had all sorts of impossible yearnings—the atmosphere of cent. per cent. seemed death to me. It was all no use, of course; my destiny was mapped out for me from my cradle, and my ambitions were ridiculous—in my family everything is 'ridiculous' that is not allied to trade"—he was talking rapidly, as men do talk when ashamed of their own earnestness. "I do not know why I am telling you this, I am sure it cannot interest you; but you remind me of myself as I used to be, excepting that you are cleverer. If I had a sister like you, if I had met a friend like you out there, I might have done something in the world after all!"

"'Age is opportunity no less than youth itself,'" quoted the girl; then she added hastily,

"Pardon me, I did not mean that you were old!"

"No, I am not old," he returned, "not old as years are counted, but I have outlived the belief in my own capabilities. When I wrote my—my 'Shilling Shocker'—it revived for a while; I almost hoped—why should I not admit it?—I did hope that my probation was going to bear fruit after all! Often the occupation became a confidant rather than a labour, and I was fool enough to imagine the thoughts I had grown resigned to keeping to myself, because I had no one who cared to listen to them in conversation, might be deemed worthy of perusal in black-and-white. A stupid blunder, was it not, to fancy I could interest the public where I bored my friends? But I was speedily undeceived; the thoughts were not considered; what reader looks for *them* between the covers of a 'Shilling Shocker'?—he wants the story. Until to-day, no one, even in my own circle, has appeared to be aware that they exist; nobody but you has so much as credited them with being anything more than 'padding'—necessary introductions put in to fill out the plot; and yet an hour ago we had never seen each other, and if I had followed my intention of spending the afternoon in Liverpool we never *should* have seen each other, in all probability, to our lives' end!"

"You will persevere," she declared; "you will persevere, though you may not think so now. From India you will submit another manuscript, and another, and another, and presently you will command a wider audience. Who knows, when you come home next time you may be a great author!"

"And find you a celebrated actress!" he rejoined with a smile. "I wonder if I shall ever go to the theatre in London one evening and recognize my companion of this afternoon? I wonder if you would remember me if I came behind the scenes?"

"I am going to watch the newspaper columns for the advertisement of that new book of yours in the meanwhile," she retorted gaily; "and now I *must* go, or I shall be late!"

"It seems a mistake somehow that we have only met to say 'good-bye,'" he murmured; "but when I come to the theatre——"

"You will be famous!" laughed the girl.

"I shall be old, and very likely bald," said the man sadly, "but I shall come, and I will throw you a bouquet! Will you do me a favour? I have not known you very long to ask one, but I should like to keep this copy you have marked, and take it out to India with me, and turn to your notes now and then to remind me of your encouragement; will you let me?"

"Good-bye," she said.

"Will you let me?" he repeated.

"You would make fun of them one day," she objected; "you would be surprised you were not offended, and marvel at 'that girl's audacity.'"

"I will never make fun of them," he answered gravely, "and I shall never marvel at 'that girl's audacity.' Give me this book, and help me to get on!"

"I give it to you," she said; "take it, and fulfil the old hopes you have told me about!"

She extended her hand, and he held it an instant in his. The sunshine had faded while they talked, and now the pool that had danced so merrily slept in shadow. As he stood looking after her, the nun's veiling made a little stain of colour on the grayness, growing fainter, like the light, with her every onward step. The scene was no longer beautiful, it was desolate and bare. Vaguer and more indistinct grew the outline of the receding figure; the pink, merging into amber, was lost amidst the darkness of the trees, and, as a bend in the path hid the last flutter from his sight, Mr. Cunninghame sighed; he sighed because—he could hardly have answered why he sighed himself.

The Social See-saw.

THEY were rehearsing at the Empress's Theatre.

The fog that for the past two hours had been steadily enveloping the London streets, had at length found its way inside; and the empty auditorium—its brown-holland swathings flapping above velvet and gilding with every current of invading air—yawned cynically upon the efforts of the players, who from time to time congregated in the wings by knots of twos and threes to mutter anathemas on the weather.

In the O.P. entrance a little group of chorus-girls, in dripping waterproofs and muddy boots, stood listening apathetically to what they termed the "cackle" of their more favoured sisters with lines, and sullenly inquiring among themselves "why the dickens they were called so early?"

"He always does it, and we shan't be wanted for an hour yet," remarked Lydia Vavasour, viciously, referring to the stage-manager, with her mouth full of ham-and-beef sandwich. "Beast!

I shan't come till twelve to-morrow, see if I do!" Discontent was apparent in the countenances of all. Beneath the general depression, the best parts no longer held out promise of a "hit;" even to the author, the dialogue had lost its sparkle, and seemed flat.

"Chorus to-morrow at eleven, please! You won't be required to-day!"

At this intimation they flocked, giggling and grumbling, through the narrow doorway into the passage beyond, honouring with several backward stares upon the step a man who, with gloved wrists protruding from the pockets of his overcoat, was lounging by the fire just inside the hall-keeper's recess. One of their number, a fair, pretty girl, simply dressed, detached herself from the rest, and at the sight of her he came forward, and they shook hands. That was all; there was nothing demonstrative about the greeting; it was as cool and collected a "how d'ye do" as could well be conceived; yet these two people were very absurdly in love with each other indeed, and every one of the crowd of chattering young women was perfectly aware of the fact, as the couple, amidst sundry nods and nudges from the lookers-on, proceeded to the hansom in waiting at the bottom of the court.

"Cissy!"

"Dick!"

It was raining hard. The lamps splashed the sloppy pavements with stains of yellow light; in the gutters, the water and the mud flowed fatly. Rattling slowly through almost deserted thoroughfares, the cab at length drew up with a jerk before an office of melancholy exterior, and the lady and gentleman descended. The driver had discussed a short clay pipe, and imbibed "a drop of summat hot," procured by an accommodating loiterer from the adjacent "pub." before they emerged, and took their seats inside the vehicle again. Around them, the shabby, plush cushions exuded an indescribable odour of mustiness and damp; the window came down in their faces with a clatter and a bang; and behind the glass, blurred with the moisture that trickled monotonously into the frame, the lips of the male and female fare met silently in a long kiss of promise and content.

While Jehu had been fortifying himself against the elements with rum and shag, two more fools had blundered, and they who alighted from the hansom Mr. Robert Ashford and Miss Cissy Kent, had returned to it as man and wife.

When it leaked out that Mr. Ashford had married a chorus-girl, folks received the intelligence with the indifference begotten of contempt. Very many seasons ago he had vanished from

"Society," and his mésalliance was merely regarded as the last step in a downward career. In the parlance of clubdom, "Dick Ashford had been going to the bad for years," though, to do him justice, murmured clubdom over its cigarettes, he must have drunk away his brains to a considerable extent before he committed a blunder as irremediable as this.

Behind the scenes, however, they had another version. They said that Cissy Kent was as honest a little body as ever breathed, "straight as a die," and possessed of the merit even rarer than histrionic ability among her class, the ambition to get on. They added that she had thrown herself away on a man with nothing to recommend him but the cut of his clothes, and it would not be long before she found it out.

These criticisms notwithstanding, which tallied only on the point of pronouncing the match a mistake, the behaviour of the parties principally concerned at present evinced no signs of regret for the departure taken on that memorable November morning when they had commenced their honeymoon in a pair of cosily furnished apartments in Great Russell Street. Mr. Ashford, indeed, with a "monkey" to his credit, had proposed a preliminary month in Monte Carlo, but the bride immediately crushed this suggestion as too preposterously extravagant to be considered;

and when they came in out of the fog, and went to the "home" they had engaged, it seemed to her, lying back in the chintz-covered armchair, with her hand in his, and her slippered feet extended luxuriously towards the welcome fire, that she could not love the man too much who had given her this delicious sense of security and ease in exchange for the slip-shod poverty of a "combined room" at the wrong end of Waterloo Bridge.

In the first flush of matrimonial tenderness, Dick Ashford found the evenings with his wife at the theatre insufferably dull, and before the expiration of a fortnight had urged her strongly to resign her post. "What did they want," he asked, philosophizing on the hearthrug across a brandy-and-soda, "with a guinea a week from this when they had close upon four hundred pounds lying at the bank? No, no, that was just where women made the mistake! Trust to him, when a fellow was well-dressed, and could stand drinks enough, he was generally able to hear of a good thing in time, and meanwhile the clever course was to appear as substantially off as they possibly could!"

So the name of "Cissy Kent" disappeared from the foot of the Empress's programmes, and Mrs. Robert Ashford had her stall at the West End houses instead, both agreeing that the luckiest

day each had known was the day they had married, and next to that, the one on which they met. To the man the unfamiliar respectability was refreshing, and the dash of Bohemianism when he took his wife to a café, a little questionable for supper, imparted just that flavour to the decorum essential for a palate somewhat too jaded to appreciate les convenances in their entirety. To the girl the indolence of witnessing "a show from the front," the very act of folding her delicately gloved hands, and waiting to be amused, the tiny opera-glass levelled at the stage from that unaccustomed position across the dear old "floats," were all fraught with the fascination of freshness, and as intoxicating as they were new. Thus both husband and wife were satisfied, and—neither being addicted to the analysis of sensation—for a considerable period each was in ignorance that their contentment sprung from novelty alone.

It was only for a period. By-and-by Mr. Ashford's thoughts turned towards the evenings of his bachelordom, the more varied distractions, the wider range of companionship, he had abandoned; and Mrs. Ashford, amongst the audience, silently pictured the players after their exits, and followed them mentally to the dressing-rooms, and listened again in fancy to all the "extras'" tales of hope and disappointment

in the darling regions "behind" that were now impassable.

Each had begun to yearn for the life which had been relinquished, and the man returned to it first. Two-thirds of their money had melted, and the "good thing" of which he had discoursed so learnedly six months since, after assuming various visionary forms, now a partnership in a proprietary club, anon an interest in a projected company, was no nearer attainment than before. It was in search of it, he explained, that he had taken to quitting the house in dress-clothes alone about nine p.m., and letting himself in with the latch-key slightly unsteady in his gait, and decidedly husky in his tones. The "good things" appealing to Mr. Ashford's type are not met with in the city.

The landlady now referred to the solitary lodger upstairs as "a neglected wife," and daylight of late had often discovered her alone on the bed where she had cried herself to sleep.

At last she went back to the stage. Her voice was no fortune, but it sufficed for the chorus in comic opera, and she was offered an "understudy" of a few lines in the preceding farce. Dick accorded his permission, very red about the eyes after an absence of eight-and-forty hours, and the girl almost forgot her unhappiness. An "understudy!" It was a step in the direction

she had always planned; it was the bottom rung of the ladder which, to her heated imagination, bore the dazzling inscription of "Actress" on its height.

Excepting that, being now April, no exterior influence was at work to add to the dreariness of its aspect, the Empress's presented much the same appearance when Mrs. Ashford walked across its boards again as it had borne on the morning that Cissy Kent had hurried from rehearsal to get married. Knots of women were congregated here and there expatiating upon the number of their "changes," and the drawbacks and attractions which each attire possessed. Half a dozen who only wore four costumes apiece were bent upon convincing the majority, who were allotted five, that so far from feeling sorry for the deprivation they esteemed it "a jolly good job."

"We couldn't change from the pages' things quick enough to come on in the last scene, so we aren't in it!" they cried with tumultuous explanation, "we shall be dressed, and half home, before you are 'off.' How's that for high?"

It was the old existence wedded to new cares and anxieties, for it became an accepted thing that her salary was to defray as completely as possible the weekly bill, and when she hesitatingly petitioned for the requisite assistance from his

purse, Dick, with suddenly developed theories on the subject of expenditure, responded anent the madness of "eating up their capital." Once, waylaid as he was leaving the house in elaborate toilette earlier than was his wont, he said more; he said "he was damned if he had known his marriage would cost such a lot!" And the girl, bitterly conscious of his extravagance, and at her wit's end herself, with a superfluity of winter gowns, how to save sufficient shillings to run up a few yards of print for the spring, retorted with a passionate rebuke, and then ensued their first quarrel. He was out when she got back from the theatre, but next afternoon she suggested timidly that Mrs. Barker had two rooms vacant on the third floor; they would be much cheaper than her own, and—didn't Dick think they would do quite nicely?

About a month subsequent to this alteration in their domestic arrangements, the stage-manager beckoned to the astounded little aspirant at the fall of the curtain, and informed her that, as the lady whom she understudied would be leaving, he had decided to entrust her with the part.

She hardly knew how she expressed her gratitude, for her head was in a whirl. Half a dozen lines with a sentence sure to get a laugh if properly delivered! The intelligence seemed too glorious to be real.

When she reached the dressing-room in company with the others, all babbling of her good luck, she was astonished to find Miss Vavasour, one of six pages, still before the glass—retarded, it transpired, by the carelessness of the laundress, of whose stupidity she was launching into furious denunciation.

Apprised, in a trio, of the improvement in her companion's prospects, she was pleased to offer her congratulations with the sarcastic comment that *some* people were artful enough to get round the *right* people, and their advancement suffered not from any unfortunate ignorance of which side of a slice of bread the butter was laid. This observation, however, might have led to nothing further, for Cissy was in no mood to take offence, if it had not been for a trifling occurrence which was destined to add fuel to the flames.

Dressing with trembling celerity she was ready to say "Good night" while Miss Vavasour's countenance was yet an unpleasant spectacle of vaseline and "make-up." It was the last straw, and drew a shaft of truly feminine malice—

"Make haste, my dear; your husband 'll be waiting supper for you!"

The girl turned with flashing eyes—

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, you know! He'll be sitting on the

doorstep, singing 'Home, sweet home,' and watching till you come back!"

The shriek that followed this witticism echoed in the ears of the unhappy wife all the way downstairs, and when, on issuing into the street, she actually ran into Dick's arms, the revulsion of feeling was so great that she barely noticed that his manner was constrained, or heard his mumbled ejaculation to the effect that he had not expected her to be out so soon.

A fortnight afterwards the stage-manager patted her approvingly on the arm and told her she had acquitted herself well; he intimated, moreover, that next Friday night her envelope would contain a trifling increase, in consideration of her extra work.

That Friday night was a very important one in Cissy's calendar, for the following morning would be the anniversary of Dick's birthday, and by dint of excessive economy, and banishing from her mind the allurements of yards of print, she reckoned to be able to buy him a present. Having not so much as sixpence in the world till treasury time came round, she was forced to postpone her purchase until the conclusion of the performance, and then the lateness of the hour somewhat limited her selection. Few of the shops were open save the tobacconists', and the gift of necessity resolved itself into a cigarette-case. She was

threading her way among the throng in the Strand, picturing his surprise, the precious packet clasped tightly in her hand, when a block in the pedestrians caused her suddenly to pause, and before she was free to resume her course, a hansom had pulled up almost at her feet, and its occupants got out. They were a man and woman, the former laughing at some remark of his associate's as they brushed past her to the entrance of the restaurant by which she stood. It was the laugh attracted her attention, and then, across the shoulder of the burly constable in front of her, she saw Lydia Vavasour and Dick.

Sick and faint she groped her way towards home. The whole universe seemed topsy-turvy under this last indignity. She saw squalid virtue huddled, starving and unheeded, in the mouths of the filthy alleys to which it had been crowded off the pavement by successful vice. She saw a woman with yellow hair and diamonds spit in the face of a ragged flower-girl, who was imploring her to spare a penny. She reflected that both these human beings were of an age, born, in all probability, in the same station; had opened their eyes in life upon similar surroundings, and she recognized it was the honest one that was destitute, while her sister in satin drove away swearing, to the admiration of a

sycophantic mob, who yelled, shrilly mirthful, as the outcast fell back from the horse's feet, wiping the other's offering off her cheek.

At noon next day passionate words broke the silence of the Great Russell Street lodging. Mrs. Ashford told her husband she had endured his treatment long enough; she said if he had no affection, he might have at least shown decency; she cried that his own self-respect would have prevented a gentleman making his wife the laughing-stock of the theatre where she worked to earn their living!

"Go your way, and I go mine!" she exclaimed; and the man, stung to the quick, retorted that she might go where she chose, and as speedily.

The present was stamped on the floor, and then wrath gave way to resolution.

"It is best for both! I suppose we were not fitted for each other, but my love is dead, crushed like that silly thing there on the ground; you have killed it, Dick, and you will never see me any more. I've no husband, and no home; I leave you as you took me, penniless, but I *have* got my profession and my hopes, and I'm Cissy Kent again!"

A little theatrical, perhaps, but she had been cradled in the theatre.

Before the lamps were lighted, the assistant at the little fancy-stationer's across the road had

twice observed Mrs. Barker's maidservant running out for a four-wheeler, once at three, and next at five o'clock. Both departed from No. — with luggage, and the first carried away a lady, the second a gentleman. Then a card was put in the window which announced apartments to let.

Ten years passed before the man stood in London again, and he had changed in the interval.

"Ashford!"

He paused, scarcely determining in his degradation whether recognition should be a matter for congratulation or despair.

He winced as he witnessed the amazement his appearance provoked, the backward step which followed the inspection of the clothes that he knew were shocking, and the eyes that would look haggard in spite of his will.

"You find me seedy, old fellow!" The quiver of his lips belied the miserable attempt at ease. "Very seedy," he repeated tremulously; "in fact I'm broke."

When this man before him was a boy, they had been companions, and Ashford had "shown him life," spending, to give him his due, considerably more in the process than his youthful disciple. There was perhaps a remembrance of this in his mind as he inquired, "And what are *you* doing?"

settling his napless hat with a momentary return to his former jauntiness of demeanour, and eyeing the partner of his old extravagance wistfully.

"I? Oh, I'm running a show—a theatre, don't you know; but I must be moving; I've an appointment, or I'd say come and have a bit of lunch. So ta-ta."

"One moment, Lindsay. Hang it, it's not pleasant to admit, but, by the Lord, I've only twopence I can put my hands on. Can you—can't you—shove me into something now? you might surely do that."

"Can you act?" said Mr. Lindsay, facetiously.

"Act!" echoed Dick; "of course I can't act, you know that!"

"Then I don't see what *I* can do, 'pon my honour! I'm deuced pressed for ready money myself this month. Tell you what: if you're really stoney, and don't mind 'walking on,' take this card down to the 'Sceptre,' and ask to see Mr. Smale. And now I *must* be off. Ta-ta!"

The first impulse of the wretched recipient of this favour was to fling the pasteboard in the mud; but hunger's influence is very powerful, and prudence prevailed.

That night Mr. Robert Ashford was huddled in a whitewashed garret with six or eight other supernumeraries, ruddling his cheeks with rouge according to their instructions, and mutely asking

himself if the limits of destiny had now been reached, or if it could be ordained that he was to sink deeper still.

Deeper? He thought not, as the call-boy's shout summoned him, with the whole gang, like convicts, to the wings; he prayed not, as, clothed in a miserable travesty of evening-dress, he leant there, bitterly abashed by his position, awaiting the setting of the "ball" scene, which was to consummate his shame. He reviewed his career; he wondered if he had pluck enough for that final plunge which should end it altogether, and, while wondering, was pushed aside by one of the staff, who bade him roughly, "Get out of the leading-lady's exit!"

He drew back with a muttered apology, and a woman swept laughing past him from the stage, followed by a long roar of applause, that sounded to his unaccustomed ear like the rattle of artillery, muffled and far off.

"Wot an orkerd chap you are!" said the carpenter; "blowed if yer wasn't standing right in Miss Kent's way! Halloa, mate, wot's up?"

It was something down; the "orker'd chap" had suddenly gasped for breath, and, before any one could save him, fallen on the floor. It was something down; a woman on her knees beside him loosening his collar, and smoothing the hair from his poor, wet brow. Pillowed on her lap,

the tired eyes opened slowly with a look of infinite appeal. Aghast and pitiful, the face above him drooped lower—lower yet—till the word he would have spoken was hushed to silence by her lips. And in that kiss the "super" and his wife had met.

"Fluffums."

FREDDY LUDLOW was the son of a rector in the shires, and, as he did not manifest any inclination for the Church, his father declared that the only thing for him was to be a barrister. The process by which the rector arrived at the alternative is not very clear, but he did arrive at it, and Freddy accordingly went up to Town, and ate his dinners, and prepared himself to shine in the profession of all others for which he was most unfit.

He was a short young man, with a shock of stubborn hair, mild blue eyes, and an expression of amiable innocence. To look a fool, when you are decidedly the reverse, may be very advantageous in life, if you are independent of your neighbours' good opinion; but to look a fool if you have to rely on their assistance to reach the first rung of the ladder, is the next worst thing to being one.

Nobody entrusted Freddy with a brief, and,

after a while, he found his vocation distinctly tedious. To perspire in court, and make his head ache in the acquisition of legal knowledge which he would never apparently have an opportunity to display, seemed to him stupid. Even the view of the tulips, and the murmur of the fountain bored him by degrees, so at last he allowed his wig to repose in its box, and the drab and gray volumes on the shelf to grow dusty, and he took to writing comedies, on which he wasted his postage-stamps, and which returned to him—when the managers did not lose them—after many days.

How long he might have continued the occupation if nothing had occurred to interrupt him, it is impossible to say. As it happened, however, when he had amassed a collection of rejected manuscripts, considerably bulkier than the dusty library, his father died—the end having been hastened by the collapse of one of those bubbles which seem especially blown for the destruction of widows and parsons. He died, and Freddy was left with nothing but his sorrow and a hundred pounds. He was not very practical, but it was obvious to him that he would have to earn a living now, and, as the shock left him capable of reflection, he began to ask himself what he should do.

As a result, he decided to go on the stage.

He had a passion for the stage; if he could not write for it, he would act on it. He had not the least idea that his appearance intensified the difficulty of his obtaining an engagement a thousand-fold, and he betook himself to an agent, to whom he imparted his desire, and paid a booking-fee.

The agent was an affable man, but slow—so slow that presently the hundred pounds was only fifty; and, in view of the fact, Freddy visited other agents, all of whom seemed strangely to resemble the first gentleman in their characters.

Then Freddy answered advertisements in the theatrical papers, but nobody ever answered *him*, and he was within measurable distance of despair and a clerkship, when, through the interest of an acquaintance in the Temple, who also dabbled in dramatic literature, he found himself "walking on" in evening dress at a West End theatre, with nothing to say, at a guinea a week.

The piece did not run very long, and in the next one there was not a "ball scene," and so no "guests" were required; but, having scented the footlights, he felt that any other vocation was henceforth impossible, and he had profited, moreover, by the conversation in the dressing-room.

He now understood that he had wasted his time and his money by pinning his faith on the agent fraternity before he had played some parts, and gained a few "notices;" and, on the same principle, he realized that it was useless addressing graceful letters to managers who had never heard of him. The only thing he could do was to bombard them with introductions. He went to his friend in the Temple again, and lured him into an adjacent bar, and by-and-by—so beneficial is the judicious application of dry sherry!—meek little Freddy Ludlow was "shivering his timbers," in a nautical melodrama, to an audience, with a discomfiting habit of making facetious remarks.

Still it was a stock season, and it meant experience. He murdered a new part every week, and sometimes to applause. After the seafaring-party he played a London "rough," "doubling" it with a good clergyman, who came on in the last act, and established the hero's innocence. Then they put on *Arrah-na-Pogue*, and he was cast for the serjeant, and when he uttered the famous line to the effect that his prisoner was "A man in trouble, and not a badger in a hole to be baited by curs like you!" he brought the house down, and subsequently shed tears of triumph in his make-up box.

To follow him through all his vicissitudes

would be as unprofitable as he found his profession. It is enough to say that when he had been on the stage for three years—counting the intervals between his engagements, which were a good deal longer than the engagements themselves—he discovered, to his surprise, that his pen, which he had never relinquished, had become quite as valuable a factor towards a livelihood as the theatre.

He had taken to writing short stories, and as he was even asked for these sometimes by a certain appreciative editor, and no manager ever asked him to go and join his company, he gradually hung about the stage-doors less and less, and sat at the table in his bedroom more and more.

One day he was offered the chance of doing the theatrical notices for a minor periodical. It was a very minor periodical, and the salary was proportionate; but the income would at least be regular, and Freddy took a decisive step. He abandoned his hope of becoming an Edmund Kean with an alacrity he had never conceived to be possible, and called himself proudly a dramatic critic—though the laundry-bills for so many dress-shirts were a consideration.

Later on he returned to his first love, and wrote another play; but this time he collaborated with a dramatist of some position, and for

eighteen months basked in the belief that his fortune was made.

It was a drama—at once sensational and domestic. There never *was* so strong a drama, nor had any novice, since the world began, had such luck as he in finding a well-known man like King willing to work with him! His future was assured now! *A Woman's Crime* was submitted to one of the best houses in London, and the management was delighted with it, and talked of putting it on next. Somehow, though, when the time came, they did not. On the whole they did not know that it suited them. It was a pity that they had not said so in the first instance, but, albeit a little damped, the authors despatched it somewhere else.

Here certain alterations were suggested, with the intimation that if they were made, the piece would be produced in the spring. Freddy did not approve of the suggestions—he considered they were "artistically wrong"—but his partner, who had more worldly wisdom (and a large family to bring up) said that "so long as the damned thing was 'done,' that didn't matter a straw!" and they therefore went to work, and chopped and changed as instructed.

The literary carpentering and joining took a good deal of time and thought, and, in spite of all their pains, it was not so well constructed a

piece after they had finished as it had been before they began. The manager, however, signified approval of the manner in which his hints had been followed, and so they drew a breath of relief, and smiled the smile of labour rewarded.

Their satisfaction, alas! had been premature, When the spring came, it was not *A Woman's Crime* which was put into rehearsal. The manager said he should probably do that in the autumn; and when the autumn came, he said he should most likely do it in the spring. They asked him desperately if he would advance a couple of hundred pounds on account of fees, and he "feared it was impossible." Then they threw up their arms, and took the manuscript away from him, and Freddy told his collaborator he might keep it, as a souvenir of their association.

But it was an awful blow to him, though he attempted to take it fighting. Until the prospect vanished, he had not known how entirely he had been relying on it, and now his scanty means, his obscurity, and his thirty years combined to make a situation that crushed him. He felt suddenly tired and hopeless. He wanted to get on—to be famous. Instead he was living in one room in Bloomsbury, and dining for a shilling. It had been endurable while he had something to look forward to—even he had not thought about it much then, accepting the life cheerfully—but after

dwelling for eighteen months in a castle in Spain, it made his heart ache. He felt like an exile who has dreamt of Piccadilly and wakened to the Cape.

No further possibility of greatness occurred to lighten his gloom, and he plodded on drearily. It said something for his sweetness of disposition that he did not vent his disappointment in spiteful criticisms for the minor periodical at this period. He used to sit in the stalls, and clap his hands, and his "copy" was as fair as usual. If he envied the blissful beings whose names were blazoned to all London on the hoardings and the omnibuses, he kept it to himself, and refrained from remarking that "the reception of the latest musical comedy was another instance of what rubbish may hit the public taste."

So things went on until a misfortune happened. The minor periodical died of a weak circulation, and Mr. Frederick Ludlow was out of office.

The cessation of a salary, small as it had been, was a serious matter to him. He made a gallant struggle; he wrote sheafs of short stories, and sent them out broadcast, but, as most of the papers that accepted them kept him waiting six months for his money, his industry did not avail him much.

He got into arrears with his landlady, and lay in bed half the day because he felt his hunger less there. He often dined on a pipe because it

was cheaper than a chop, and he pawned his watch and chain, and a ring that had belonged to his father, and his evening-suit, which he did not require any more.

He had been—or had called himself—a literary man for so long now, that it was a process with him to realize that his pen was useless. He hoped against hope until the humiliating truth forced itself into acknowledgment by sheer persistency. Well, his writing would not keep him —it was obvious, he owned it! His difficulties were *not* temporary; they had come to stay. He was a failure, a complete, ignominious failure, and —there was nothing for it—he would have to go back to the stage!

He was ashamed to beg the influence of the barrister who had helped him to get his foot in years ago. The barrister was quite a big man now, and *he* had not got on a bit! No, he could not do it. He called on all the agents instead, and quoted his experience. He wrote to his old managers; and he tramped the hot pavements of the Strand daily, trying to look cheerful when he met an actor of his acquaintance, but nervous of stopping to talk to him for long, because he could not afford to ask him to "come and have a drink."

The last engagement that he was able to mention was so very remote that he found it almost as hard to return to the boards as it had been in

the first instance for him to get on to them. And he was older—his appearance had not improved with time. Inconsistently, too, and as if Nature had been anxious to add insult to the world's injury, he had put on flesh. He was now stout. With his tubby figure, and his bristling hair, and his mild little eyes peering out of a weary face, he was as unpromising an applicant for a "part" as any stage-manager was likely to receive. People looked at him and smiled. Everywhere he went he was told there was "no vacancy." His exit was always the signal for subdued laughter, and it was remarked "how funny it was that a man like that should be bothering the agents!" But it was not funny for Freddy—not at all.

At last he did secure an engagement. It was an awful, a terrible, descent from what he had expected; but he took it because he had to take it or starve.

He "went out" with the touring company of a London success, as prompter, and to play three or four small parts, for twenty-five shillings a week. During the first act he stood in the wings with the book in his hand; and in the second, he appeared on the stage as the Foreman of a jury. For half of the third, he was in the wings again, and then he had a few lines as an Arab sheik, and so on.

They "opened" in Wigan; if anything could

have intensified his depression, Wigan would have done it, but nothing could. A touring company has more grades and sets than society in Bedford, and lowest of all who figure in the programme —ignored by the Lover, and scorned by the Chambermaid—is the prompter who plays small parts. To be sure the prompter in his turn may look down upon the baggage-man, but Freddy was denied this compensation because it was not in his nature to look down on any one.

He went back to his lodging after the first performance miserable and exhausted. The constant and hurried changes of costume, coupled with his nervousness—for the stage was so new to him again that he was nervous even with half a dozen lines—had thoroughly worn him out. It was not until the following night that he really began to take stock of his surroundings—or that he knew either how wretched he was going to be.

His nervousness was observed, and provided material for excellent jests. He was nicknamed "Fluffums," which, in theatrical slang, signifies a gentleman who "fluffs," or stumbles in his part. He was really such a curious little man that it was refreshing to chaff him! He might have escaped otherwise, as being lowly and beneath one's notice, but the Heavy Mother had declared he was "consequential," and the adjective was found descriptive; and a "consequential prompter"

was an anomaly that could not be tolerated for a moment.

Freddy grew used to the hasty "changes" as the week went on, and he schooled himself to stand in the wings holding the 'script, without wincing; he grew used to everything except the raillery and disdain. When he reflected that a few months since he had lolled in the West End stalls, a dramatic critic, and that then his companions of to-day would have bowed, and scraped, and contemplated him with reverence, his soul revolted. But he could not hint at his former grandeurs—that would be ridiculous. He was now a prompter, and must be content to be regarded as one. What he had been once had nothing to do with it.

From his humble position in the wings he commanded a good view of the stage, and by-and-by, when everybody was sure of his part, and there was no need of a prompter's services whatever, a peculiarity was remarked in "Fluffums." It was pointed out that he was never absent from his post during Miss Bellamy's big scene. No matter that she, like the rest, was letter-perfect now, no matter how swift a toilette it might necessitate! No sooner did the scene approach than down "Fluffums" bustled, and stood in the prompt-entrance, looking at her with eyes that never wandered from her face.

And of course it only meant one thing, though that thing was so wild, and ludicrous, and unprecedented, that it was some time before the company could credit it. The prompter had fallen in love with the leading lady!

He only lived to be noticed by her. He was jealous of everybody she spoke to—on the stage and off. He even envied the property-man, for there was sometimes occasion for Miss Bellamy to address a few words to the property-man. To himself alone, the futile prompter, she never had need to speak, nor did he dare to devise an excuse for claiming her attention.

She was pretty, Maud Bellamy, and rather a clever actress, albeit she was still in the provinces, and admitted to being twenty-six. *Her* vicissitudes too would have filled an interesting chapter, but she had risen to dazzling heights compared to Freddy, and when somebody told her that she had "made a conquest, and his name was Frederick Ludlow," she did not even know who was meant. After the joke was explained she smiled faintly, and begged the other "please not to be so absurd"—because she was a personage. But, all the same, she looked at Freddy the next time she passed him—because she was a woman.

And henceforward Freddy was conscious that Miss Bellamy knew he was watching her during her big scene; and Miss Bellamy would instinc-

tively glance across at the prompt-entrance as she tottered through the O.P. archway in the snow-storm, to assure herself of his presence. Once he was not there—he could not help it—and when he met her in the wings later, waiting to go on in the last act, she stopped and asked him the reason.

"Mr. Ludlow, do you know you nearly made me forget my lines?" she said. "I missed you, and it made me nervous."

Not so nervous as he! His heart thumped, and he stammered at her with a flush on his face.

"I—I beg your pardon—I was very sorry! Mr. Shorey couldn't play to-night, you know, and his understudy had to go on, and *I* had to take the understudy's part. I was 'changing' at the time of your scene."

She nodded, smiling.

"It doesn't matter; I wondered what had become of you, that was all. It is a very good house, isn't it?" And she passed on.

It did not occupy thirty seconds, but it was an event that sent him home happy, and it was the forerunner of other fragmentary conversations which made him happier still. She knew he was attracted by her, and she saw he was a gentleman, and, though his position in the company prevented her taking his devotion seriously, it interested her, and was not unpleasant. It seemed to her

rather pathetic that a man of education should be fulfilling such ignoble duties, and she was sorry for him. Not very sorry, and not very interested, because her ambitions did not leave much room in her mind for sympathies of any sort, but just a little, yes, or she would not have provoked comment by condescending to talk to him.

That was at the beginning, and the development was somewhat slow, because Freddy felt so handicapped; but by degrees he taught himself to throw off the feeling of restraint, and by degrees Miss Bellamy found that she was giving him encouragement.

Still she meant nothing by it; only now she was treating him as an equal, and flashing just such a glance at him sometimes as she would have shot at the leading-man, or any other admirer who stood on a level with her. It was not considerate, and she knew it was not; it was not dignified, and she knew that too; and so she lectured herself in her dressing-room one night, in the process of changing her frock, and then adopted a manner so very distant towards him that, after twenty-four hours of suffering, he went up to her and begged for an explanation.

"Have I offended you in any way, Miss Bellamy?"

She tried to look as if she did not understand.

"Offended me? No—what makes you ask?"

"I was afraid that perhaps I had. You—you are not being so kind to me; you are different."

"I did not know."

"No? I have felt it. . . . You aren't angry?"

"Why should I be? Of course not. But——"

"Go on!"

"Do you think it is very good for you that we should talk together quite as much as we have, Mr. Ludlow? Isn't it better that you should not see so much of me?"

He stood gazing helplessly at the stage; his unconcealed misery was very flattering to her.

"I feared it meant that," he said. "Somebody has——"

"Somebody has done nothing—I have been thinking myself. And I've come to the conclusion that I have not been sensible. If I did not like you I should not say it; I should not mind. But I do like you, and—there my cue!"

They were behind a canvas door, and she darted forward, and opened it, and made her entrance with a peal of laughter which jarred upon him this evening, although he knew it was in the part.

When the curtain had fallen, and all the players were preparing to go home, Freddy waited at the foot of the ladies' staircase for Miss Bellamy to come down. He asked her if he might walk as far as her lodgings with her, so that they could

discuss the matter quietly, and, as she had already displayed all the wisdom possible to her in such a connection, she said he might, and he did, and the result was a foregone conclusion.

She said she should always be his friend, and it was because she was his friend that she wished him to see less of her. And *he* said that to have her friendship was the greatest earthly honour and happiness that he dared aspire to, and so might he not talk to her just as much in future, and even more? There was really nothing to be urged against it, put like that—it was simplicity itself; and she let him hold her hand for a minute and a half at the gate, while telling him he was only to think of her as a sister.

Maud Bellamy had satisfied her conscience, and from that date she flirted with "Fluffums" wickedly. It was not an honest, open flirtation, it was a sly, sneaking, insidious thing, much more deadly, which did its damage under an alias. She called it their "interest in each other," and their "interest in each other" used to take him to her apartments to tea on an average three times a week. He brought her flowers, and she would wear them at the theatre in the first act; and he told her something of his life, and she listened with deep, attentive eyes; and he cried to her how wretched his present position made him, and she comforted him with the "platonic" pressure

of slim white fingers—affecting not to understand that it principally made him wretched because it placed her out of his reach.

And meanwhile he thought her an angel, though socially she was only a vain, agreeable, and rather selfish woman who was amusing herself with him. Almost every woman not positively tedious has the desire to be unconventional at some period or other, and—conventionality being, after all, a relative standard—for a country actress to be unconventional is difficult. Miss Bellamy had overcome the difficulty when she determined to flirt with the prompter.

How long the novelty would have pleased her under ordinary circumstances who shall say? Not many weeks probably at best, but as it was, the end of Freddy's illusion was precipitated by a new arrival on the scene.

The leading-man was transferred to another company, and his successor was quite an Adonis, who once had actually played in London. The glamour of the metropolis clung to him still, and the cut of his numerous suits of clothes was positively fascinating. And he paid marked attentions to Miss Bellamy, and the lady did not repulse him. Freddy beheld it all, sick at soul.

Francis Knight, the new leading-man, and Miss Maud Bellamy used to stand and talk

together, with low voices, in the wings and passages, and one evening, when Freddy came upon them, quite by accident, Miss Bellamy frowned at him, and turned aside impatiently. As he passed on, she evidently said something about him, for her companion burst into laughter, and the low-comedian, who had observed the incident, winked at the "villain" with appreciation.

Then the chaff took another form, and it was: "Fluffums, beware of jealousy—it is a green-eyed monster!" or "Fluffums, why so merry?" or "Look at Fluffums' nose—does it hurt you now it's out of joint? Ha! ha! ha! the time *will* come, no matter, Fluffums! Pistols and coffee for four!" Which was all very witty, but, as Freddy was not a boy, scarcely in the best of taste.

It took him some time to realize that her pretences had meant nothing—that her earnestness and sympathy had been all humbug—even though he was invited to tea no longer, and often met her walking with Knight in the streets. It is doubtful, indeed, if he would have realized it when he did but that she very nearly told him so. Of course it was his "fault"—it was one of those situations where the man is wrong whatever he does. Of course he had "brought these hard words on himself," and *she* had been mercifully

anxious "to spare him the pain of the interview!" He had gone to her lodgings and appealed to her.

"My dear Mr. Ludlow," said the leading-lady, with uplifted eyebrows, "I don't know what you complain of! I can't permit any friend to dictate to me which members of the company I may speak to."

Then he had done more. The "secret," that had never been a secret, was openly avowed, and he told her that he loved her, that he worshipped her, that her coldness was breaking his heart. He declared that he was not her "friend"—had never been her "friend"—and that she knew it as well as he.

Miss Bellamy stared at him in a long silence.

"So," she said slowly, "this is my return for consenting to believe you! I *warned* you that I was being unwise, and I let you persuade me against my own judgment. Well, I should have known better; it serves me right!"

"Maud!" gasped Freddy.

"Please don't call me 'Maud,' and please don't let us have any discussion! I made a mistake, and there is nothing more to be said. I was your very good friend, and I hoped I might remain so; but you give yourself the airs of a husband. And something else: when you come spying round the theatre after me, to see what

man I am talking to, you do a thing I don't allow."

"Spying?" he protested. "I? Oh, I have never——"

"If it hurts your feelings to be told the truth, you have only yourself to blame for it. You leave me no alternative when you come here and reproach me. Now, good afternoon, Mr. Ludlow. I am sorry my friendship was so misplaced. I may say I think you might have shown a little more gratitude for it—*considering!*"

The colour sank from his plain face as if she had lashed him across it. She met his gaze stonily, shrugged her shoulders, and sneered—as she did at the "villain" in the piece.

"Please shut the door quietly after you," said the leading lady; "my head aches."

He went—enlightenment had come, and the darkness had fallen; and he was the Foreman of the jury, and the Arab sheik, and the rest of it the same as usual that night. But every nerve in his body was tense with pain, and if Miss Bellamy had known all he was feeling, perhaps when she came into the green-room and found him crouching there, woebegone in a property-chair, she would have refrained from remarking audibly that she had "always understood a green-room was reserved for the Principals."

He got up and walked out, with a look towards

her like a kicked dog, and she surveyed her figure in the pier-glass, and powdered her nose again complacently.

How far they were from suspecting the development that twelve more hours would bring!

When Freddy rose the following morning, it was Saturday, and Saturday being treasury, it was necessary for him, like everybody else, to present himself at the theatre at one o'clock. He felt so broken, he had suffered so much more keenly about her than she was worth, that before meeting her again he went into a bar to try if he could pull himself together with some brandy. The *Era* was lying on the counter in front of him, and mechanically, scarcely knowing what he was doing, he began to turn the leaves. As he did so, the title of *A Woman's Crime* leapt out of a page in capital letters, and struck him in the eyes.

It was being produced—in London!—at the Royal West-Central Theatre! The house was "Now closed for rehearsals of *A Woman's Crime*, by Messrs. J. V. King and Frederick Ludlow." The production would introduce a surprising mechanical effect. There had never been so strong a company before—even at the West Central—as the one which the enterprising management had secured for *A Woman's Crime*. So much was expected of the piece, that the largest sum of money ever paid before

the first night had already been offered to the authors for the American rights. And of course his collaborator had written to his old address more than a month ago, to tell him all about it, and the letter had never reached him!

He grasped the paper with both hands. Fires flashed in the sunshine, and he thought he was going to fall off the three-legged stool. He was no longer "Fluffums" the despised prompter. He was a London playwright, a personage to be conciliated; a few months more, and he would be a rich man! A sob shook him—of joy and thanksgiving, such as he had never known in his life, and he reeled out into the street as if he were drunk.

The company were all on the stage when he had composed himself sufficiently to put in an appearance, and he noticed that, as he entered, everybody looked towards him with a questioning air. Some one in the group was holding a copy of the *Era*, and presently Mr. Knight crossed over to him, and the others hushed their conversation to listen.

"Any relation to the author, Ludlow?" said his rival, doubtfully. "I see King has been collaborating with a man of your name for the West Central."

"He has been collaborating with *me*," said Freddy, with great distinctness. "I'm afraid I

shall have to leave you all very shortly, to superintend the final rehearsals."

Yes, and Miss Bellamy was among the group, and heard his answer! And their eyes met, and then she turned away with a look on her face that made him feel sorry for her in the midst of his triumph. It does not often fall to the lot of a provincial actress to have a London dramatist in love with her, and as she thought of what Freddy could have done to push her forward, and certainly *would* have done, it needed all her self-control not to burst into tears.

He was not chaffed or slighted any more while he remained with them. He was congratulated violently, and slapped on the back, and called "dear boy"; and he was pressed to have whiskies-and-soda, and asked if he would "use his influence" on various people's behalf. Never was there such a startling change known as that which occurred in everbody's bearing towards the prompter! There was only one person who did not come up to him and wring his hand, and "hope he would not forget old friends in his prosperity;" there was only one actress in the provinces who, for years afterwards, was remarked to show a strong distaste when a certain subject of theatrical interest was mentioned. Her name was Miss Maud Bellamy, and the subject was the Rise of "Fluffums."

Sketches.

To Miss Verschoyle.

DECIDEDLY one of the plainest women you ever saw in your life, but when she began to sing you forgot her face. You thought of your ideal woman whom you had never met—of the books you meant to write—of the country dimpling under an April sunrise—of anything you loved or yearned to love. And then, as she continued to sing, you thought of Miss Carmichael herself, and she made your heart stir just as if she had been beautiful, and for thirty seconds after she rose from the piano you had to struggle against an impulse to fall at her feet.

I ought not to have gone there. To me a woman's first duty is to be good-looking. She may of course do more—she may, for instance, be lovely—but at any rate she should be good-looking, if she would justify her existence in my eyes, and Miss Carmichael's spell, brief as it was, was dangerous. It displeased and bewildered me when I "came to." It made me feel as if

I had been behind a horse over which I had nearly lost control. Yet how could I deny myself the delight of listening to her divine voice! And, for that matter, the evil effect was delicious also while it lasted—something like that which one imagines opium or hashish eating must produce. Think, I could say to myself whenever I would, "To-day I will go and be breathlessly in love for a minute; for the space of one minute I will taste the excitement of adoring a woman with all my being!" A moral drunkenness, a vice, if you desire to call it so, but one which few men are able to command! I was constantly swearing I would give it up, only to find myself, a week afterwards, at the door of the Earl's Court flat again. And things went on like this for six months, when I met Norah Verschoyle at Hampton.

We were both staying with the Liddingtons. She did not take much notice of me at first—perhaps that was what stimulated my interest in her—but I was sensible of the warmest admiration the moment we were introduced. She was very, very pretty; insolently pretty, if I may use the term, and she wore big, shady hats, and white frocks, and her hands were the softest little darlings that ever played with a punt pole.

I used to look at Miss Verschoyle's hands and wonder what it would feel like to hold them.

Foolish people may suppose that it feels the same to hold one woman's hand as another's, but that is quite a mistake. It is different every time, or we should seldom hear of a man being engaged more than once in his life.

On a certain Thursday afternoon, after our acquaintance had progressed, and I had sculled her down to the back-water, I sat with my gaze riveted on those hands of hers. They lay in her lap, and I observed that they had browned a trifle with exposure to the sun. The delicate veins were as blue as the sea round the island of Madeira, and they were if anything more kissable than before.

"Isn't it heavenly?" she murmured.

I agreed; it was heavenly. "Don't you want to talk?"

"What shall I say?" she asked.

"Anything you like—or nothing. For myself I am perfectly content."

"Then I'll dream."

"Do!"

Her eyes drooped—re-opened, and met my own, which had wandered to the white lids; I thought she looked conscious. She unfurled her sunshade. The fascination of the hands was upon me again.

"Let me help you," I said.

I touched one—it was warm, thrilling; it sent

a shock up my arm like an electric battery. I loved her, and I detained it in a clasp.

She uttered my name with remonstrance and surprise. I had gone too far to retreat, even had I wished to do so. Her fingers and my lips met, and my lips were scorched. Her face glowed, and softened. I meant to ask her to be my wife, and I foresaw that I should not plead in vain. At that very moment Lady Liddington was heard calling to us from the bank, and the opportunity was past. She had brought me a telegram recalling me to town.

We all went back to the house together, nor was there any chance between luncheon and the time my train started for me to speak to Miss Verschoyle privately again.

However, we understood each other—I was sure of it; and I travelled up to Waterloo with exhilaration. I called on the solicitor whom I had to see, and arranged to affix my signature to a necessary document the first thing the following morning. Then I should be free to return to Hampton, and could propose as orthodoxly as was required. Almost I whistled as I bent my steps towards my chambers after leaving him. Norah was fond of me—was waiting for me, ready to say "yes." Rapturous reflection! And what jolly rings there were in the jewellers' windows!

I stopped, and inspected one more closely. As I did so, some one exclaimed: "Mr. Craven, how d'ye do!" and turning, I saw Miss Carmichael.

I thought how dowdy she looked as I responded to her greeting. She was going home, and I offered to see her as far as the Temple Station.

"Where have you been?" she asked, as we walked along. "Do you know that it is more than a month since we have seen anything of you?"

I explained that I was staying on the river. Though she was so plain, she was an amusing talker, and when she begged me, if I had no better occupation, to accompany her to the flat, and have some tea, I was not inclined to refuse.

I went, and when tea was over I said, "Won't you sing?" I was in the mood for music, more especially for Miss Carmichael's music. She smiled assent, and seated herself at the piano, while I lay peacefully back in an armchair by the window. She never wanted one to turn the leaves for her; that was one of the charms of her performance.

"What will you have?" she said, glancing at me across her shoulder.

I hesitated. "'Whatever you do will sure be right,'" I hummed.

"Oh, *please!*" she murmured with a mock air of suffering—she could not tolerate the drawing-room ballad—"Do you know Bizet's 'Vieille Chanson'?"

She struck a few chords, with an indifferent touch, and then her voice rose. And her voice called "Norah! Norah!" and showed me the back-water and the boat anew. The trees swayed, and the birds in the branches began to twitter, and the water sparkled, and my heart was aching so with love that I wanted to lay my head on my dear one's breast, and feel those fragrant little hands stroking my hair.

Suddenly I was again in the parlour; the last note had died, and Miss Carmichael was looking an inquiry.

"Don't stop, I beg you! Go on, do!"

She obeyed. But why did she not take me as before to the river? I remained in the Earl's Court room this time, and by degrees I was satisfied not to leave it. I was listening with trembling nerves to Miss Carmichael herself, or rather *not* herself—to the other Miss Carmichael, who had always magnetised me while she sang. She drifted from the "Solvieg's Lied" of Grieg into some Gipsy Songs of Dvorák's; and I worshipped her! Drunk or sober, I said that to hold this woman in my arms, and to feel her breathing there, would be the greatest consummation of

my life. Never before had the mastery she had established over me been so irresistible and complete. I left my chair, and leant on the piano, gazing down upon her. She had drawn me there with her voice, and now she pulled me closer with her eyes. I did not think her beautiful—even in my madness I knew that she was ugly—but there was a fascination in her ugliness that I was unable to withstand. I looked at her, consumed with a fever. I forgot that her dress was ill-fitting and shabby; I forgot that when she left off singing she would be merely a plain and ordinary person again. While she did sing, she was as potent as Helen or Cleopatra, and I adored her.

As she finished I caught her to me.

"I love you," I said, "didn't you know? I have loved you always!" I thought it was true.

It was a grand moment!

But now I am engaged to Miss Carmichael, and Norah must be wondering why I do not return to Hampton. She will consider I have behaved very badly; two men whom I invited to dinner, and confided in, consider I have behaved very badly. Nobody seems to realize that I could not help myself—that I am the victim of circumstances over which I had no

control. It is in the faint hope of justifying myself to Miss Verschoyle that I have written this narrative. The danger of my Siren seeing it is small—besides, if she does, she may be offended with me, and let me off.

Posthumous.

THERE have been moments, in thinking of her, when I have found it impossible to realize that she was going to belong to me one day. I suppose most men happily engaged have known that "too-wonderful-to-be-true" sensation, but with myself I must now call the feeling a presentiment. It is a question whether I should have the right to marry any woman since I have learnt what this cough of mine signifies; but Lilla! how can I make *her* my wife, and condemn her to exile in a colonial village for the rest of her days? Lilla, to whom the world means London and "mamma"!

"Go to the Cape, and there is no reason why you should not live for years. You say you are a literary man; you can work as well there as here. But to remain in England will kill you."

I hear the words still. Still? They have been beating in my head ever since I walked out of the consulting-room, and stared at the

street that had altered somehow. I must go to the house this afternoon, and tell her. But it is our "good-bye," and she loves me; it is a horrible duty. I may break down myself. I wonder if she will ever marry anybody else now; if it is selfish? I would not say it to any one, of course, it would sound ridiculous—but I don't think that many people can care for each other so much as Lilla and I do.

* * * * *

I believed I could write. I am no more able to express the love I feel for this beautiful wife of mine, the supreme tranquillity of our life together, than I am able to describe a perfume! I try to tell *her* sometimes, but the words won't come—even to Lilla, who is no critic, who cares nothing for the phrasing, and only for the sense. We have been married six months. How can I show myself grateful enough to her for the sacrifice she has made? If ever I should be tempted to be irritable or impatient, I need merely recall that afternoon in England when the tears ran down her white face, and she threw her arms round my neck, declaring she would be my wife in spite of everything, that the exile was preferable to our parting.

We have a little villa here in Wynberg, with a garden hidden from the road behind gigantic cacti. It is very quiet, but the climate is

exquisite; I feel a new man under this sky which has the deep blue colour of the sea we saw around Madeira. My writing-table is screened from too great a glare by the foliage of a huge camelia tree; and a French window opens on to the *stoep*, where Lilla sits, in soft white frocks, and reads or works, until I join her. In the evening we wander out, like two children, to explore—and lose ourselves—or buy an enormous basket of purple grapes from one of the neighbouring vineyards for a shilling, going back to eat them on the lawn under the stars, while we watch the fireflies glinting in the hedge, or a "bush fire," bright for miles, burning on the heights of Table Mountain.

It was awfully silly, because I knew; but I have just said to her—

"Are you quite sure that right at the back of your head, you aren't thinking all this a tiny bit dull, Lilla?"

If ever there was an Angel upon earth—— I am not in banishment, I am in Paradise!

* * * * *

I have been working very hard. It is pleasant to remember that my last book made a success at Home, now that I am engaged on another. I read some chapters yesterday to Lilla—she liked them. How fortunate it is she does take an interest in my profession! Unless you go to

Government House (which we don't) the society here is desperately limited; an ordinary girl accustomed to London gaieties would bore herself to death. Even as it is, I can't help asking myself sometimes if she is as contented as she says she is. I dare say I am mistaken, but now and then I have fancied she is moping a trifle. I pray I *am* mistaken; it would be a terrible reproach to me otherwise! The mail is just in, and she is reading her mother's letter; after her mother's letters I always think she looks dissatisfied. However, I am inclined to be hypersensitive, no doubt; under the circumstances it is natural. I expect, if I put it to her, nobody would laugh more merrily than Lilla at my "mare's nest!"

* * * * *

The second anniversary of our wedding-day! We indulged in a little jaunt to Sea View, and dined at an hotel. Not so lively as I should have liked to make it for her, but the resources are few, and the programme was the best I could devise. A man certainly assumes a great responsibility when he allows a young girl to agree to live abroad with him all her life; if she *is* tired of it, I cannot blame her! If it were a pecuniary interest simply that I sacrificed, I would take her back to England to-morrow, but, meaning what it does, it would be an outrage

on her tenderness to suggest such a thing. The novel is progressing very well; in fact, it is nearly finished. A few more chapters, and it will be ready for the mail.

* * * * *

Lilla had spoken rather slightingly of the physician's opinion once or twice of late. Nothing tangible—it was more her manner than her words—but it has made me wonder, supposing I did propose to return with her, whether she might not be willing to agree. It is a shameful thought to have; I know I am unjust to her in harbouring it, only I can't get rid of it quite; it sticks, and writhes at odd moments. She is in the garden—I have just been to the window, and she smiled. When I look at her, I hate myself that I can wrong her so deeply as to imagine she would consent! My novel is done, but I do not feel so exhilarated as I ought. I am restless, I cannot get the doubt out of my mind. I *know* she would refuse, and yet——

She is back on the stoep; she is embroidering in a deck chair: I can see the shadow of her figure on the floor. I will put the question to her; I will say to her, "Let us go Home!"—I have said it.

There is a silence while I count my heart-beats. Two reels of silk clatter from her lap to the

ground, and roll along the boards; and then her voice, broken with delight—

"You *darling!* Oh, how *Heavenly*!" gasps Lilla.

I have added "Fin" to the last page.

Nemesis.

He was a very good boy, but he had an ideal—that was what ruined him. In his early youth he had been fascinated by the short story "From the French," and the aim of his life was to mould himself upon the hero.

These short stories are always imparted by a young gentleman, against his will, to a guest who has admired the study of a woman's head which he keeps in his portfolio, and "starts visibly to perceive." He always exclaims that he did not know it was there—though it sounds unlikely—and then sits lost in thought, to "rouse himself with an effort," and communicate its romantic history without tautology or hesitation. The literary man who bites his pen between his paragraphs, is envious of this achievement.

Young Mr. Pettifer was envious, albeit not a literary man—he was a clerk in a ship-broker's office—and though he had no excuse for pur-

chasing a portfolio, he did as well as he could without one.

When any other of the clerks paid a visit to Pettifer's lodging, there was generally a cheap photograph lying where it would be noticed, and as soon as Pettifer was asked about the original, he would make an ostentatious attempt to conceal it, and murmur gloomily, "Don't question me, my friend!"

He had a habit of displaying sudden emotion, also, at the chance mention of any place or year, so that if conversation touched upon Ashton-under-Lyne, or eighty-seven, Pettifer would be the startled prey to acute recollections, and gaze with a far-away air into his buried past. A blind beggar under the window, with a penny whistle, could frequently revive such painful associations in his mind that he was obliged to hurry from the room.

The trouble with him was that he had no imagination: he was unable to sustain his imitation of the hero. When a sympathetic accountant pressed him for particulars, his narrative was bald, and lacked probability. He hinted at sufferings in a northern town at a date when the accountant knew he had been in Bermondsey. And he acquired photographs that might be bought at the print-shops, and which stamped him a liar. So he was chaffed, and unhappy,

and cast about him for means to confound the scoffers.

The "means" occurred presently in the form of a damsel who dispensed buns and poached eggs in an "A. B. C."—initials which might appropriately stand for "Awfully bad coffee," but do not. She permitted Pettifer to offer her little attentions; detailed, she accepted "button-holes" from him, and let him shake hands with her when he left. Her Christian name was Sarah, for which Pettifer was sorry; but she was a pretty girl—the only pretty girl ever discovered in an "A. B. C." shop—and he always thought of her without the "h." Impatience to obtain her likeness with a tender signature at the back, used to keep him awake at night, but things were a long time progressing so far as that, and in the meanwhile the incredulity about him continued to wound his self-respect.

By-and-by, however, she consented to walk once round Lincoln's Inn Fields with him before she took the 'bus home, and a week or so after that he suggested the Crystal Palace and fireworks. Sarah said she didn't know "if mother would like her to," but she would ascertain. For herself—she blushed.

"Mother" apparently had no objection, and they went—in hansoms, and first-class compartments. He soon began to find he was spending

more money than he could afford, and revelled in the knowledge. This was as it should be, he felt. If she neglected him at tea-time, he went out in the evening, and drank two glasses of beer desperately, and hoped he would look haggard and dissipated when he presented himself at the office next day. He complained of the sparseness of opportunities for talking to her alone, and she answered that there were "plenty of inks and paper." Stimulated by their abundance and the reminder, he wrote Sarah many passionate epistles, for the rapture of having love-letters in reply, to leave on his mantelpiece. He smiled with the consciousness that he was vindicating his veracity nobly, and at this stage produced overwhelming evidence to crush his detractors to the earth.

But he was not fond of her at all; that is the point of it. He did not dislike her, he was deeply grateful to her, but as to being in love with her, not an atom! After he had begged for the likeness, and received it, and everybody knew about her, he proposed to retire from the acquaintance. Only he had reckoned without Sarah. Sarah said she had always understood they were engaged to be married—and so had "mother." She told him that men could not trifle with young girls' affections as he seemed to suppose, and inquired how much

he would like his letters to her read in court. There was such a thing as "Lor," she said mistakenly.

Pettifer turned a light shade of green, and surrendered to pressure. To do him justice, he framed the best tale he could out of the circumstances, but the materials were scanty, and would not have lent themselves to much embroidering even by defter fingers. Two or three of us had dropped into his diggings one night, and his melancholy was so very unfeigned that somebody commented on it, and demanded explanations.

Young Pettifer shuddered, and then got up with a valiant effort to realize the hero at the moment when he "rises from his chair, and silently unlocking the escritoire between the windows, takes from it a faded miniature." He took Sarah's likeness out of his chest-of-drawers, and held it up.

"This, gentlemen," he said, "is a portrait of the lady who to-morrow will become my wife!"

It was dramatic; and we all congratulated him, and had whisky-and-water. The truth only leaked out afterwards. It was an awful punishment to overtake a harmless liar. Sarah has developed into rather a shrewish little person to-day, and her prettiness is more of the housemaid kind than ever. Her jealousy of her lord has certainly subdued his tendency to leave

photographs about his rooms, but those who liked poor Pettifer are inclined to pronounce the remedy worse than the complaint. It is unnecessary to state that this story is designed to be included in a Sunday-school book; the moral is so obvious that its destiny is assured.

A Romance of a Coffee-stall.

It was as unpretentious a little coffee-stall as could be. Almost the last thing in the world you would have thought of connecting with a romance, or, under ordinary circumstances, have done so much as think about at all. No polished copper-boiler beamed seductively upon the cab-stand opposite to enhance its natural attractions; no new-fangled, patent double burner, flinging a meretricious radiance across the hunks of stale bread-and-butter, professionally known as "door-steps," tended to relieve its gloom.

Night after night for ten years it had stood at the same corner as invariably as the lamp-post; and night after night, during the last three, its outcast-clientèle of the homeless and the half-starved, creeping to its shelter from the thoroughfares beyond, had never failed to notice the peculiar fact that the proprietor's eyes were always the most hungry in the crowd. Ravenous wretches, whose choice of a lodging lay between

the bridges and the casual-ward, remarked it with astonishment; women with terrible faces that had once been innocent, commented upon it amongst themselves; it passed into a byword in time—"As hungry as Daddy Doorsteps' eyes!"

The man interested me from the beginning; there was a something so patient, and yet so hopeless in his gaze, which haunted me almost against my will. An unaccountable fascination in an indolent life, but after that occasion when I first saw him peering out into the darkness, I used often to stroll southward from the club before returning to my rooms, and once in the small hours when trade was slack, and the snow lay thick upon the London pavements, he told me his story—if it can be called one—told it so simply, that I think he only made it more pathetic, and then I knew *why* "Daddy Doorsteps'" eyes were always hungry, and what it was they sought.

"I'm looking for my girl, sir!" he said wistfully —"her who left me three years ago, and I haven't never heard on since.

"'Take care of our child, Joe,' said her mother, 'when I'm gone!' And I promised her I would.

"Milly was a little bit of a thing then, as the neighbours used to call 'pretty baby,' not old enough to understand. But as she grew up, and the name seemed to fit her just the same, she was

still known as 'Baby' down the court; and we was everything to one another, Baby and me!

"Folks said I spoilt the lass, and made a lady of her, but I couldn't bear the thought of her going out to service, and getting them soft white hands of hers rough with work. It sounds strange, I dessay, sir, my feeling like that—me not being a gentleman neither—but it was just a common man's pride.

"So she teased me to let her earn some money by sitting to the artist people instead; models got a living so easy, she had heard, and besides, we could be together that way much the same!

"That's how it was that one summer evening when she came in, she brought a pictur' with her, painted by some swell who had seen her in the studios. He was only an amateur, she said, and had told her she might keep it for herself. It was her own portrait. Not as I had ever seen her—quite different, and grand, with a great bunch of yellow roses on her bosom, and pearls twisted in her hair.

"I could hardly believe it was my little girl right off!

"'Why, Baby,' I says, laughing, 'I didn't know you was so beautiful as this!'

"'Didn't you, father?' she says, curious-like, and turning away. 'Perhaps that's only how *he* sees me!'

"She hung it over the mantel-shelf; but I never got fairly comfortable with that pictur' a-looking down on me; it spoilt my smoke, sir, just as if a stranger was always in the parlour—a stranger there was no getting friendly with! Them smiling lips was very lovely, of course, but it wasn't my Baby's smile, and I fancied her best in the old stuff gown she used to wear at home.

"I suppose I must have been blind, for I never thought of harm, not though she used to be gayer now than I had ever known her, and all of a sudden drop down into a chair so quiet that I was frightened she was ill. One day when I kissed her, she burst out sobbing, and asked me about her mother.

"'You haven't never missed your mother, Milly, have you?' I said—'her you can't remember? You haven't been unhappy nor lonely, dearie, with me?"

"'You've been father and mother too, daddy,' she says, sorrowful-like, and putting her arms round my neck; 'the kindest father a girl ever had!'

"I've often been glad to call up them words of hers since, for that was the night she went. 'Gone away,' so her letter said, 'with the man who loved her, and had solemnly swore to make her his lawful wife.' Her dead mother heard that oath, sir, and Heaven will judge him now he's broke it! —for only shame could keep her silent.

"I don't live in that house no more—the furthest place that I could find was homelier than home when she was gone; but I still held on to the old stall—I'm a-waiting here for *her!*

"And some time when that villain has abandoned her, and she's in this big, cruel city all alone—maybe with a little child upon the breast where he once put them yellow roses—she'll think of her poor old father, and come home, to be forgiven, and to rest. . . . Are you going, sir?"

Yes, I was going. The tale was told; the stars were growing fainter in the sky; and in the chilly light of dawn I saw the man was crying. I looked back once; his was the solitary figure in the deserted street—he was watching for her still. Only death will end his vigil; only death can give the wanderer back to him again. Stunned and conscience-stricken, I knew it! For *I* had been the villain of whom he spoke, and to the "rest" which is eternal, his baby already had—gone "home."

A Reverie.

REBECCA is in the bedroom, dressing, and Lucy —who looked very sweet in her simple frock— has gone to some entertainment at her school. So I am alone. The armchair is very soft, and the room is quiet, though overhead I can hear my wife faintly as she moves to and fro between the wardrobe and the toilet-table. Her feet are heavy. I am glad that she is going to the Jacobs's. It will be a rare treat to me to spend the evening by myself. The fire seldom burns so clearly, I think, as it does now, and my cigar tastes better than usual. Rebecca makes me sick; she is so fat, and her laugh—*Gott!* her laugh means so little; and all my nerves jump when it shakes her. Yet a good woman! and once she did not irritate me. Nor, had she not been good, would she irritate me now. That is a fact; few wives would have done as much as

she did! I ought to remember it, but, instead, she makes me remember——

Himmel! how one smokes when one thinks! Let me have the box beside me. In the tobacco-wreaths I see myself as I was fifteen years ago; and I see the apartment in which I lived with Dora. How small it was!—on the first floor of a lodging-house! But with its refinements also, the pretty, little, inexpensive trifles which girls like Dora purchase and contrive. Why did I not marry Dora? My parents would have been horrified—she was a Christian; I cannot think of any other reason, though at the time reasons must certainly have appeared numerous to me, for I do not recollect that the idea of marriage with her ever disturbed my peace. Perhaps because she did not worry me with entreaties! She had been very poor and friendless when I met her; she may have fancied, in her sensitiveness, it would be ingratitude to ask me for more than I had done. And she loved me; oh yes, she loved me dearly! And the business was my father's in his lifetime; I could not have afforded to displease him. She must have known that! She must have known I could not quarrel with him, even if I had wished, though I did not——

Fervently, although it is all past and the shrub

that was planted on her grave has grown big beyond the railings, I hope she did not grieve; I have wondered many times—since! She was so gentle and—I *will* say it—pure, that it has seemed to me she must often have suffered while she smiled and kissed me. And she died, and was buried, and the child—the baby Lucy—was given to strangers to be nursed. How long ago it feels—in another life. But I wish that Lucy might have called me "Papa!" . . . Where are the lights; my cigar is out!

Rebecca: She was slimmer when her family made up the match between us. Yes, and good-looking; and my sorrow for Dora was faded—two or three years had past. I was already my own master, and trade was brisk. I was happy with Rebecca. I gave her many diamonds, and the other women envied her, and at home we got on very well. If we had had children of our own, I wonder——?

Lucy was four when Rebecca took her. She asked no questions; to this day she has never asked me anything. It shows a big heart! She is like a mother to Lucy. Shall I ever forget how grateful I was! The tears came to my eyes when she said "yes." She should be worshipped for such a generosity—*but Lucy reminds me so of Dora.*

Not at first—ah no; just a little thing not able to talk plainly yet! It was afterwards, quite lately, that I noticed the wonderful resemblance. She is fourteen already—a tall, slim girl with the tiniest hands to be conceived, and with every move she brings back Dora before my eyes. She has the same features, the same trick of smiling sometimes with the mouth a little to one side; she grows more like Dora every day. There are hours when I look at her across the table when my wife and she and I sit at meals together, and my throat gets tight. The past is suddenly alive again to me, and I would spring up and put my arms round her neck, but Rebecca might guess the truth, and it would pain her to the heart if she suspected. Yet it is true, and I cannot help it, that in the child who reminds me of the dead so vividly my wife has a rival here on our very hearth. It is Lucy, whom she consented to adopt, who shows me innocently that my wife is fat and silly; it is Lucy, who, as I watch her at her lessons, recalls to me the thoughtful face of the girl I used to love. And I regret! Ah, the good *Gott* forgive me, but I regret with all the soul of me, and would be young once more, with Dora by my side, and see her by my side to-day! . . . How warm it has become! the window should be open

such a night. . . . Rebecca has come downstairs. She wears her black satin, and powders her nose again before the mirror. She persuades me to accompany her ; I shall be "dull alone ?"

"My head aches ; otherwise—— Adieu, enjoy yourself, my dearest !"

THE END.

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